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Woman's Work: Female Lighthouse Keepers in the Early Republic, 1820–1859

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WOMAN'S WORK: FEMALE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS
IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC, 1820-1859

by

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B.A. May 1997, University of North Carolina Greensboro


A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Old Dominion University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of


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
HISTORY

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
December 2010

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ABSTRACT

WOMAN'S WORK: FEMALE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC, 1820-1859

Virginia Neal Thomas
Old Dominion University, 2010
Director: Dr. Carolyn J. Lawes

During the Early Republic between 1820 and 1859, women, on average, comprised about five percent of the principal lighthouse keepers in the United States. These women represent a unique exception to the experience of the majority of working women during the Early Republic. They received equal pay to men, and some supervised lower-paid male assistants. They filled these predominately male positions because lighthouse work had much in common with stereotypical woman's work, they were most often related to the previous keeper, and they fit within cultural ideals of gender roles. Inquiry beyond the romantic image crafted for these light keepers reveals real woman struggling to survive in a turbulent period of American history. The history of female lighthouse keepers from 1820 to 1859 thus broadens our understanding of American women's occupational history as well as the interplay of cultural constraints on women's employment.

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To the resilient women that kept lights during
an oft forgotten period of American History.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis began as a research paper for Dr. Carolyn Lawes in an Early Republic reading seminar during the Fall of 2009. Professor Lawes crafted an engaging reading list that explored varied aspects of the Early Republic. I credit her intelligence and enthusiasm for drawing me into such a dynamic period of American history, and thank her immensely for her guidance in this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Jane Merritt and Dr. Timothy Orr for their insightful comments and suggestions during the review process.

Generous praise is also due to the following institutions and persons who were very helpful during my research: U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office, National Archives, Library of Congress, Monterey Public Library (Dennis Copeland), Indiana Historical Society (Suzanne Hahn), U.S. Coast Guard National Aids to Navigation School, Mary and Candace Clifford, Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Association (Terry Pepper), and the Michigan City Public Library (Michelle Burkhart).

Finally, I give great thanks and affection to my family, especially my husband and sisters, for always supporting my research and listening to my latest ramblings. Stacy, Mary, and Dr. J, what in the world would I do without each of you!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 1996, the United States Coast Guard (USCG) began launching a new fleet of hundred seventy-five foot buoy tenders named for famous lighthouse keepers. Five of the fourteen black-hulled vessels were named after women (ports in parentheses): Barbara Mabritry (Mobile, AL), Ida Lewis (Newport, RI), Abbie Burgess (Rockland, ME), Katherine Walker (Bayonne, NJ), and Maria Bray (Atlantic Beach, FL).¹ These vessels honor the memory of women who held some of the first federal jobs open to women.

These vessels also draw attention to the question of why women were serving as federal employees in masculine vocations during the Early Republic, a period when American society ostensibly kept women away from public roles. What was it about lighthouse duty that made it available and attractive to some women? Why did a society that purportedly adopted a “separate spheres” mentality allow, even request, women to be lighthouse keepers? Who were these women keeping the lights? What were their daily lives as keepers like? Were they paid and treated the same as their male counterparts? How do these women’s experiences broaden our understanding about women and work in the Early Republic and beyond? Inquiry past the popular romantic image crafted for

¹ Barbara Mabritry, Key West Light, Florida 1832-1862; Ida Lewis, Lime Rock Light, Rhode Island, 1872-1879; Abbie Burgess Grant Whitehead Light, Maine, 1875-1890, Katherine Walker, Robbins Reef Light, New York, 1894-1919; and Maria Bray (keeper’s wife who kept lights during a severe storm while husband was away), Thatcher Island Light, Maine, December 1864. Note that Barbara Mabritry is the only keeper from the Early Republic period. Ida Lewis and Abbie Burgess Grant, though generally regarded as having performed lighthouse work earlier, were not officially appointed until the dates indicated. It also appears women were generally chosen from geographic necessity so that the name was based upon the area in which the new vessel would be stationed.

these light keepers reveals real woman struggling to survive in a turbulent period of American history. Only certain types of women were hired to keep lights, working at a lighthouse had much in common with stereotypical woman's work, and their appointments fit in with cultural ideals of gender roles. The history of female lighthouse keepers from 1820 to 1859 thus broadens our understanding of American women's occupational history as well as the interplay of cultural constraints on women's employment.

Although lighthouses generally attract much public attention and affection, they, like the majority of maritime interests, have until recently rarely been investigated with historical rigor.² There has not been much critical research in the area of female keepers, especially before the Civil War. Female keepers were not covered in any of the secondary historical literature on women and work in the Early Republic. Indeed, there has been no detailed study that endeavored to investigate the lives of women during the Early Republic holding federal employment. This not only includes lighthouse keepers, but also other federal employees such as clerks and postmistresses. As a result, the vast majority of secondary sources on women keepers remain the "lighthouse books" that include a sparse bit here and there about women keepers, but on the whole are simply laudatory in tone. Furthermore, these sources either have little or no documentation and

² The successful establishment of many professional maritime historical groups during the last fifty years confirms the considerable intensification of critical study in this field: International Commission for Maritime History (England, 1960), National Maritime Historical Society (United States, 1963), Commission for Danish Maritime History and Anthropology (Denmark, 1974), North American Society for Oceanic History (United States, 1974), Australian Association for Maritime History (Australia, 1978), Canadian Nautical Research Society (Canada, 1984), International Maritime Economic History Association (Canada, 1986), Institute of Maritime History (United States, 1995), Mediterranean Maritime History Network (Malta, 2000) and the East Asian Maritime History Project (Germany, 2002).

repeat popular stories without evidence.³ There has also been a growth in the past decade of juvenile literature focusing on both famous female keepers and fictional daughters of keepers to teach history or to perpetuate the romantic image of living at a lighthouse.⁴

The mother-daughter team of Mary Louise Clifford and J. Candace Clifford has performed the most thorough examination of female lighthouse keepers to date with their book *Women Who Kept the Lights*, first published in 1993.⁵ The work focuses on the entire period of female keepers ranging from 1776 to 1947, with the first third of the book covering the Early Republic. Their volume is based upon original research of primary documents at the National Archives in Washington D.C., communications with descendants of keepers and local historians, and some secondary sources. The book is arranged chronologically as well as by lighthouse so that a light station with multiple female keepers would cover all of them in one chapter beginning with the earliest keeper. Each chapter is thus a case study of both the women and the lights they kept, detailing not only events in a keeper's life, but also the history of the light. Here readers will find stories of famous keepers such as Ida Lewis, but also the lesser known Margaret Stuart and Mary Reynolds. The detailed appendix of female keepers is a valuable source for researchers and appears to be the foundation of the U.S. Coast Guard's published list of

³ A good example is "The Lighthouse Women" in David Cordingly's *Women Sailors and Sailors' Women* (New York: Random House, 2001), 215-234, which focuses on particular famous cases such as Britain's Grace Darling and uses only secondary sources. Another is "Keepers in Skirts" in Dennis M. Powers' *Sentinel of the Seas: Life and Death at the Most Dangerous Lighthouse Ever Built* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 2007), 246-266, which simply repeats well-worn stories without any citation.

⁴ A few examples are: Mary Louise Clifford, *Mind the Light Katie: the History of Thirty-Three Female Lighthouse Keepers*, (Alexandria, VA: Cypress Communications, 2006); Arielle North Olson and Elaine Wentworth, *The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter*, (Mystic, CT: Mystic Seaport, 2004); Peter and Connie Roop, *The Stormy Adventure of Abbie Burgess, Lighthouse Keeper*, (Minneapolis: Graphic Universe, 2010); Roxane Tepfer Sanford, *The Girl in the Lighthouse*, (Coral Springs, FL: Llumina Press, 2009); and Erika Tamar, *Katherine's Story: A Cape Light Novel*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

⁵ Mary Louise Clifford and J. Candace Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights: an Illustrated History of Female Lighthouse Keepers* (Williamsburg, VA: Cypress Communications, 1993). The revised second edition was published in 2001. They have also collaborated on four other lighthouse titles.

female keepers. There are also multiple sidebars covering important facets of lighthouses such as the Fresnel lens and the establishment of the Lighthouse Board in 1852.

Although the authors give some important organizational and technological background to the occupation of lighthouse keeping, they do not explore how social factors affected the employment of women keepers. In the introduction they allude to “prescriptions for proper female behavior” in nineteenth century writings, but do not examine how those social forces affected women keepers nor how women were appointed.⁶ The authors do not trace themes geographically or chronologically, nor draw any conclusions; rather, they present evidence that “dozens of intrepid women also climbed those stairs and lit those lamps and polished those lenses,” and “they too should be remembered and honored for their courage and devotion.”⁷ Thus, while the Cliffords have spearheaded research into women lighthouse keepers, their book does not offer enough historical context to elucidate the complex reasons why women were keepers before the Civil War. Yet, as the most complete history available on female lighthouse keepers, *Women Who Kept the Lights* has become the main source that many other writers use when covering this topic.

The only available scholarly secondary source focused on female lighthouse keepers is a thesis by Bethany Ann Bromwell for her Masters of Art in History degree from the University of Maryland at Baltimore in 2008. “Mothers of the Sea: Female Lighthouse Keepers and Their Image and Role within Society” examines the role of female keepers in both England and America, with the focus on the era after the Civil

⁶ Mary Louise Clifford and J. Candace Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights: an Illustrated History of Female Lighthouse Keepers* (Alexandria, VA: Cypress Communications, 2001), 2.

⁷ Clifford and Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights*, 207-208.

War.⁸ Bromwell argues that women keepers were “cultural symbols of perfect womanliness,” which ironically allowed them to hold male-oriented government jobs.⁹ She correlates women tending lights at lighthouses to other occupations, such as nursing and teaching, that opened to women because they were seen as extensions of occupations where women took care of others, which fit in with the gender norm. Bromwell also gives a detailed organizational history of the federal Lighthouse Service to explain how governmental changes affected the women’s employment. Bromwell concludes that women keepers were “dependable, brave, self-sacrificing mothers of the sea” in danger of being forgotten for their contributions to American history with the waning era of lighthouses.¹⁰

Bromwell’s analysis rests heavily on the primary research of others, notably the Cliffords, while also drawing a great deal from other secondary sources. She uses many primary quotes from secondary sources, especially *Women Who Kept the Lights*. The cited primary sources are generally newspaper items, magazines (*Harper’s Weekly*, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*) and articles, with many being accessed online. In the bibliography, Bromwell does cite a few sources from the National Archives and Library of Congress, but it is unclear if she conducted that research herself or is referring to the material as found and interpreted by others. As a result, her thesis is a solid interpretation of secondary evidence in relation to the existence of female keepers and how they were viewed by society from the nineteenth through the twentieth century. Bromwell does not, however, offer any new evidence to explain the complex social matrix that supported the

⁸ Bethany Ann Bromwell, “Mothers of the Sea: Female Lighthouse Keepers and Their Image and Role within Society” (master’s thesis, University of Maryland at Baltimore, 2008).

⁹ Bromwell, “Mothers of the Sea,” 60.

¹⁰ Bromwell, “Mothers of the Sea,” 93.

appointment of female keepers, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century. Although she includes other examples, Bromwell focuses on the “superstars” of Grace Darling and Ida Lewis, keepers who received the most public attention, in effect highlighting Bromwell’s interest in the public perception of female keepers.¹¹ Finally, the study does not investigate the women’s familial status (married, single, wife, daughter, etc.), geographic location or financial compensation in relation to the social interpretation of their roles and employment, leaving many questions unanswered.

Unfortunately, Bromwell’s work also includes a few notable errors and the reuse of particular quotes. For example, Bromwell incorrectly cites Hannah Thomas as a keeper of Boston Light instead of Plymouth (Gurnet Point) Light. Thomas is acknowledged as the first female keeper (1776-1786) and Boston Light was the first established lighthouse (1716), but Thomas did not keep that light.¹² Bromwell also repeats herself in regard to Charlotte Layton, stating she was “the keeper of Point Pinos Lighthouse in California from 1856-1860,” and noting two sentences later how “at the Point Pinos Lighthouse; there was another female keeper there, Charlotte Layton, who kept the lights from 1856 to 1860.”¹³ Such errors distract the reader from Bromwell’s analysis and create questions about the author’s thoroughness.

The USCG Historian’s Office has also attempted to do its part in preserving heritage of women lighthouse keepers. On their dense website, the Historian has a special section focusing on women in the Coast Guard and particularly on keepers who

¹¹ Grace Darling was not even an official keeper, being the daughter of the keeper at Longstone Lighthouse in England. Ida Lewis unofficially kept Lime Rock Light (Newport, RI) from 1857-1879 for her father and then mother, before being the official keeper 1879-1911. Both women achieved popular acclaim for rescues: Darling in 1838 and Lewis in 1869.

¹² Bromwell, “Mothers of the Sea,” 32. This is a confusing error, especially since she previously spoke of Hannah Thomas being in charge of Gurnet Point Light on page two.

¹³ Bromwell, “Mothers of the Sea,” 45.

are portrayed as “true trailblazers.”¹⁴ On the terse list there are only two links to sparse information: the popular Ida Lewis, and Fannie May Salter, the last female keeper. Rather than offering new information, the USCG Historian’s website instructs those interested in knowing more to consult *Women Who Kept the Lights*.

Finally, no articles about female keepers have been found in scholarly journals. The only journal that covers the topic is the *Keeper’s Log*, which is published by the United States Lighthouse Society, a member organization dedicated to preserving the history of the Lighthouse Service.¹⁵ However, this publication does not always use footnotes or otherwise adequately document sources, nor is it peer reviewed.

Beyond literature specifically focused on female lighthouse keepers, secondary studies on women and work, as well as gender roles, present a broader picture of women’s experiences in the Early Republic. Perhaps the most pervasive ideology affecting women during this period was the popular belief of separate spheres, which argued that “women were to confine their attentions to home, family, and religion; men were to venture into the corrupt and corrupting world of wage labor, business, and politics.”¹⁶ Industrialization and a burgeoning market economy caused home and work to separate so that “the middle-class home became refuge rather than a center of production.”¹⁷ In general, the “cult of domesticity” or “true womanhood” diminished

¹⁴ U.S. Coast Guard, “Women Lighthouse Keepers,” United States Government, http://www.uscg.mil/History/uscghist/Women_Keepers.asp. Very similar to the Cliffords with some differences.

¹⁵ U.S. Lighthouse Society, *Keeper’s Log* (San Francisco, CA, 1993-).

¹⁶ Rosemarie Zagari, “Women and Party Conflict in the Early Republic,” in *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*, eds. Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004), 119. See also Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (Jun 1988): 9-39.

¹⁷ Jane Lancaster, “Domesticity and the Ideology of Separate Spheres,” in *Encyclopedia of Women in American History, Volume II: Civil War, Western Expansion and Industrialization 1820-1900*, ed. Eileen K. Cheng (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 7.

women's public roles while increasing the importance of their home duties.¹⁸ The separate spheres construct applied to white middle and upper class women and did not hold true for many women who worked outside the home, who were widows, or who were poor or non-white.¹⁹ The female lighthouse keepers between 1820 and 1859 were all white women of European-descent, who were hired by the federal government to work *within* the home.

In *Home and Work*, Jeanne Boydston examines the relationship between gender roles and industrialization that caused domestic work to become invisible. She refers to this phenomenon as the "pastoralization of housework," where women's unpaid domestic labor was viewed as having no economic value in the burgeoning industrial capitalist model that prized the male wage earner.²⁰ The social value of this work, however, was an important link to the overarching social construct of separate spheres. This dichotomy of housework being invisible and yet important parallels the devaluation of lighthouse work (which had many similarities with women's domestic tasks) that maintained an important part of America's commercial system.²¹ Although unpaid, Boydston calculates the financial worth of domestic work to "easily be worth upwards of \$700," and yet a wage unattainable for the same work if pursued "outside of marriage."²² Boydston uses a wealth of primary and secondary sources in her examination, but a majority of archival

¹⁸ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, Part 1 (Summer 1966): 151.

¹⁹ For analysis of other ethnic groups see Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work: a Multi-cultural Economic History of Women in the United States* (Boston: South End Press, 1996).

²⁰ Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 142-163. For more on the gendered separation of work see Ava Baron, *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986); Wilma A. Dunaway, *Women, Work, and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²¹ Chapter Two examines the connection between women's domestic work and lighthouse duties.

²² Boydston, *Home and Work*, 134.

documents hail from New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. The focus on the northeastern United States is the main weakness of her analysis, so that her conclusions can only be extrapolated to the larger experience of women.

In *Revolutionary Backlash*, Rosemarie Zagarri examines the political role of women between the Revolution and the Age of Jackson. Unable to engage formally with politics through the vote, women remained politically active in “benevolent activities, charitable organizations, and social reform societies,” as well as through influencing husbands and sons.²³ The era that began with much hope for the expansion of women’s political roles ended with a “conservative backlash” that effectively excluded women from formal politics while simultaneously expanding enfranchisement to white males.²⁴ Zagarri credits this negative response to the inability of a post-revolutionary patriarchal society to extend equal rights to women, coupled with frantic industrialization, evolving political parties, and an untrustworthy economy. She further argues that society accepted the idea of separate gender spheres in an effort to give order to a swiftly changing world.²⁵ Thus, this “backlash” not only cut women out of formal politics but also did so on a biological basis claiming women could never obtain the mental ability to engage in politics no matter how much they were educated.²⁶ Although appearing to focus on the political life of women, Zagarri’s analysis demonstrates the complicated interaction between gender and society in regard to women’s roles in general. These intricacies are evident in the lives of female lighthouse keepers, most of whom were widows working in predominately male occupation. Zagarri’s detailed analysis uses copious primary sources

²³ Rosemarie Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 182.

²⁴ Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 1-10.

²⁵ Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 134-136.

²⁶ Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 184-185.

ranging from journals and speeches to literature and art along with secondary books and articles.

Fifty-three women were appointed as keepers in the Early Republic during the years 1820 to 1859 (Appendix A).²⁷ As this timeframe coincides with dramatic political, social and organizational changes within the United States and the administration of lighthouses, it creates a fruitful area of study not only of women serving as keepers, but of women and work in general during the Early Republic. This time period is often overshadowed by the “golden age” of lighthouses, the late nineteenth century, and conclusions about women keepers after the Civil War are often erroneously extrapolated to those who kept lights before 1860. This not only clouds our understanding of female lighthouse keepers, but also thwarts the historical interpretation of the complex nature of women and work in the Early Republic.

This study began with the raw statistical information on female keepers from both *Women Who Kept the Lights* and the USCG Historian’s Office, but was greatly expanded upon by research conducted in archives and via correspondence. It does not include Hannah Thomas, who served before the inception of the federal Lighthouse Service, or women such as Kate Moore and Ida Lewis who did the work of keeping a light but were not officially appointed as principal keepers until after the Early Republic.²⁸ Nor does it include any of the 240 women, keepers’ wives, who officially served as Assistant

²⁷ From 1790 to 1820, no women were appointed as principal keepers either due to the smaller number of established lights, the younger age of male keepers holding the positions, or other unknown reasons.

²⁸ Generally considered the first female lighthouse keeper in America from 1776-1790 at Gurnet Point Light (MA), Hannah took over care of the light when her husband left to fight in the American Revolution. The light was on the Thomas property and she tended it just over a year before hiring a man to do the job. Thomas was the first woman to actually tend a light, but the new federal government did not hire her. Kate Moore at Black Rock Harbor Light, Connecticut (unofficially 1817-1871, officially 1871-1878), and Ida Lewis at Lime Rock Light, Rhode Island (unofficially 1857-1879, officially 1879-1911). See Clifford and Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights*, 5-11, 13-17, 89-97.

Keepers during the entire period of women lighthouse keepers.²⁹ This study endeavors to uncover why the federal government employed women as principal keepers in the Early Republic, and focuses solely on women who were hired in that capacity, not those who were assistants or unpaid helpers.

This thesis begins with the organizational history of the Lighthouse Service establishing a framework for the system in which women labored as well as the type of work they performed. The next chapter investigates the appointment process of female keepers to demonstrate the affect of cultural constraints on women, especially widows, who sought employment as keepers. Finally, the pay for keepers from 1835 to 1855 is analyzed to demonstrate the parity of women's pay with that of men. Further, the lives of three diverse female keepers are reconstructed to reveal the continuity of pay, cultural constraints, and familial status.

The women hired as lighthouse keepers do not fit the stereotypical view of women wageworkers during the Early Republic. They worked for the federal government and labored *within* their home for wages equal to men's compensation. Examination of the women's familial status and cultural factors, as well as the nature of lighthouse work and their compensation, gives a better understanding of their lives and, by extension, women in general in the Early Republic. They filled these predominately male positions because lighthouse work had much in common with stereotypical woman's work, they were most often related to the previous keeper, and they fit within

²⁹ Clifford and Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights*, 209. Assistants were necessary at light stations with more lamps, rotating mechanisms or fog signals. Consequently, the government allotted one or more subordinate assistants due to the greater workload at larger lights. It was in the benefit of the Department of the Treasury to allow female family members to be assistants because were already there and often performing some part of the work. It was financially advantageous to the government since the Lighthouse Establishment did not have to quarter a separate individual or family at additional expense.

cultural ideals of gender roles. Women lighthouse keepers exist at the nexus of different strands of historical investigation including gender, housework, widowhood, lighthouse history and federal employment. The microhistory of female lighthouse keepers not only brings to light their unique existence, but also through contrast elucidates the broader experiences of other women during the Early Republic.

CHAPTER II

LIGHTHOUSE ORGANIZATION AND LABOR

The early administration of the Lighthouse Establishment and the type of work used at a lighthouse partially explains the employment of women as lighthouse keepers.¹ From 1789 to 1852, the six different government officials who managed lighthouses had many other pressing responsibilities that drew their attention away from overseeing the Lighthouse Establishment. These administrators also often lacked the technical knowledge of different lighting methods and lighthouse construction and placement necessary to create a uniform aids to navigation system. Lighthouses were important to navigation and commerce, but the work of tending a lighthouse was seen as mundane and not “true” labor. As a result, the keepers hired were most often veterans, usually suffering some sort of ailment or physical impediment, or widows.

The gentlemen who met in New York during the First Federal Congress in 1789 were not lighthouse buffs. They were merchants, traders, farmers and professionals faced with the task of interpreting the new Constitution to ensure the security and growth of the nation. The nascent Washington administration desperately needed the funds generated by overseas trade to finance the growing federal government. Since most commerce and transportation were waterborne in the late eighteenth century, lighthouses were vitally important for safe navigation. Mariners relied upon well-marked shores to safely and quickly transport goods and people to and from American ports. On 7 August 1789, Congress passed the ninth law of the nation that established the federal funding “of all

¹ The federal organization within the Treasury Department first called the Lighthouse Establishment would be renamed the Lighthouse Service in 1852, though both names would be used interchangeably until the 20th Century where “Lighthouse Service” would be used until 1939.

lighthouses, beacons, buoys and public piers erected...for rendering the navigation thereof easy and safe.”² This new Lighthouse Establishment, as it became known, was placed within the Treasury Department, further associating lighthouses with commerce. The first American lighthouse had been built near Boston in 1716, and a total of twelve stations were eventually signed over from the colonies to the federal government.³

Mirroring the general turbulent atmosphere that permeated many aspects of life in the Early Republic, the new Lighthouse Establishment was often disorganized. For the first seven decades, the Lighthouse Establishment was administered by six government officials who had many other responsibilities and lacked specific knowledge of lighthouse technology including lighting systems, lighthouse construction, and the most advantageous placement of lighthouses. At the local level, the collectors of customs received extra duty as superintendents of lights responsible for nominating keepers, visiting lights annually, proposing lighthouse locations and overseeing contractors. These superintendents were paid no more than \$400 a year for the extra work and were not chosen for the position due to any special technical knowledge.⁴ Furthermore, because they were federal appointments, collectors and lighthouse keepers were often

² *An Act for the Establishment and Support of Lighthouses, Beacons, Buoys, and Public Piers*. Public Law 9, Stats at Large of USA 1 (1845): 53-54. For detailed information on the formation of the law, including sectional tension between Northern and Southern mercantile interests that led to the building in 1792 of Cape Henry Light (VA), see U.S. Senate Historical Office, “The Lighthouses Act of 1789: Legislative History,” (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1991) available online: http://www.uscg.mil/history/regulations/1789_LH_Act.pdf.

³ Boston Light, MA, 1716; Tybee Island Light, GA, 1736; Brant Point Light, MA, 1746; Beavertail Light, RI, 1749; New London Light, CT, 1760; Sandy Hook Light, NY, 1764; Cape Henlopen Light, DE, 1765; Charleston Light, SC, 1767; Plymouth Light, MA, 1768; Portsmouth Harbor Light, NH, 1771; Nantucket Light, MA, 1784; Newburyport Harbor Lights, MA, 1788. U.S. Coast Guard, “Historic Light Stations,” U.S. Government, <http://www.uscg.mil/history/web/lighthouses/USCGLightList.asp>.

⁴ Stephen Pleasonton (hereafter Pleasonton) to Thomas Corwin (Secretary of the Treasury), 7 June 1851, in *Report on the Condition of the Light-House Establishment of the United States, Under the Act of March 3, 1851*, U.S. Light-House Board, 32nd Cong., 1st sess., 1852, Ex. Doc No. 28, 269-270.

hired and fired with the election of a new president, causing inconsistency in the performance of duties.

Those seeking a lighthouse keeper position solicited appointments from the local collector of customs, or through letters sent directly to the Secretary of the Treasury, or even the President. Citizens, merchants, politicians and mariners submitted petitions and letters on behalf of the nominee citing various factors such as the applicant's trustworthiness, knowledge, need and military service. The collector of customs forwarded this information to Washington D.C., and the president, later the Secretary of the Treasury, formally awarded the appointment to the collector's suggested nominee or someone else entirely.

As in Europe, the keeper position in America was predominately male, probably because the position supported navigation and commerce (which was generally considered to be under the purview of men), was a full-time long-term government job, and was often used as political patronage. But in the Early Republic, women, specifically widows and family members of a deceased keeper, actively solicited lighthouse keeper positions. As most successful candidates for keeper positions were nominated at the local level, the local community's knowledge and support of the deceased keeper's family was important in helping the women obtain and keep a position. Still, although work at a lighthouse had much in common with women's traditional domestic duties, the lighthouse keeper position remained male-dominated.⁵

From its inception in 1789 until 1820, the small lighthouse system was run directly by the Secretary of the Treasury or by men appointed Commissioner of the

⁵ It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the increase in mechanization and employment benefits "professionalized" the position making it more attractive to men and causing the eventual elimination of female lighthouse keepers by 1947.

Revenue.⁶ The number of lights (twelve in 1789, fifty-five in 1820), as well as their placement on the eastern seaboard, made such administration possible so that high level officials were directly involved in approving lighthouse building contracts, arranging supplies and appointing keepers.⁷ From 1820 to 1852, the Fifth Auditor of the Treasury, Stephen Pleasonton, “an accountant who knew nothing of lighthouses, lighthouse equipment or engineering,” filled the position. Pleasonton’s lack of interest in lighthouses caused the United States to lag behind Europe in the adoption of new lighthouse technology.⁸ During Pleasonton’s tenure, the number of lighthouses increased from fifty-five to 331, greatly expanding his administrative duties.⁹ Due to public complaints about the inadequate placement of lights, their brilliance, and shoddy craftsmanship of unscrupulous contractors, Congress launched investigations into Pleasonton’s administration of the Lighthouse Establishment in 1838 and again in 1842. Both investigations found the lighthouse system to be poorly equipped, constructed and maintained but ultimately left the current administration in place, perhaps because of a lack of maritime knowledge, money or attention as the nation underwent major political and economic upheaval.¹⁰ Finally, in 1851, Congress called for the establishment of a quasi-military Lighthouse Board to replace Stephen Pleasonton. This organization included naval officers, Army engineers and civilian scientists who divided the country

⁶ U.S. Bureau of Lighthouses, *The United States Lighthouse Service* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1916), 93. Secretary of the Treasury: 1789-92 Alexander Hamilton, 1802-1813 Albert Gallatin; Commissioner of the Revenue: 1792-98 Tench Coxe, 1798-1802 William Miller Jr., 1813-19 Samuel H. Smith.

⁷ Dennis Noble, *Lighthouses & Keepers: The U.S. Lighthouse Service and its Legacy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 6-7; “...up to 1820 many matters, involving even routine business, were approved personally by the President.” Bureau of Lighthouses, *Lighthouse Service*, 93.

⁸ Wayne C. Wheeler, “The History of the U.S. Lighthouse Service Administration—Part I,” *Keeper’s Log* 5, no. 2 (1989): 12. This new technology was primarily the far superior Fresnel Lens.

⁹ Noble, *Lighthouses & Keepers*, 13.

¹⁰ Noble, *Lighthouses & Keepers*, 9-10; Amy K. Marshall, “Frequently Close to the Point of Peril: A History of Buoys and Tenders in U.S. Coastal Waters 1789-1939” (master’s thesis, East Carolina University, 1997), 20-21.

into districts and instituted much needed modernization of equipment and building practices.¹¹

Pleasanton was a fiscally conservative bureaucrat managing many different departments as well as the Lighthouse Establishment, but it was during his tenure that women were first hired as lighthouse keepers.¹² Of the fifty-three women keepers, none were appointed before 1826. This was either due to the small number of lights, the younger age of the male keepers, or the gender prejudice of the five previous administrators. Under Pleasanton, the appointment of female keepers increased each decade, from one in the 1820s to nineteen in the 1840s. What was it about Pleasanton's administration that supported this trend? Ultimately, Pleasanton's dearth of lighthouse knowledge and frugality opened an employment opportunity for certain women.

Marshall argues the generally held view that Pleasanton's "lack of maritime experience and understanding" caused him to treat the management of lighthouses as just another administrative function and to rely heavily, and often erroneously, on "the influence of self-serving individuals" more interested in obtaining government contracts than producing quality items or building sturdy lighthouses.¹³ Lighthouse illumination technology in colonial America consisted of open fires or simple tallow candles, then progressed to oil lamps with curved reflectors. In the 1780s, Aimé Argand of

¹¹ Light-House Board, *Report*, 5. Members were Commodore W. Shubrick (Navy), Commander S. Du Pont (Navy), Brevet Brigadier General J. Totten, (Army Corps of Engineers), Lieutenant Colonel J. Kearney, (Army Corps of Topographical Engineers), Professor A. Bache (Coast Survey), Lieutenant T. Jenkins, (Navy). Eventually the Bureau of Lighthouses was established in 1910 as "the board which had been necessary to oversee a system too complex for one man had now, itself, become obsolete." This would finally be folded into the USCG in 1939, with keepers leaving, working as civilians or joining the USCG and serving until retirement or the automation of their light station. Wayne C. Wheeler, "The History of the U.S. Lighthouse Service Administration—Part II," *Keeper's Log* 5, no. 3 (1989): 12.

¹² Pleasanton was also "...responsible for all domestic accounts pertaining to the Department of State and the Patent Office, all bankers, consular and diplomatic accounts in foreign countries, as well as census accounts, claims adjustments for foreign governments, and boundary commissioner accounts." Marshall, "Frequently Close to the Point of Peril," 15.

¹³ Marshall, "Frequently Close to the Point of Peril," 10.

Switzerland greatly enhanced the oil lamp's brilliance by designing a circular wick and glass chimney that together allowed greater airflow, creating a brighter light that burned oil more efficiently.¹⁴ In America, former sea captain Winslow Lewis engineered a flawed copy of Argand's lamp that, although not as refined as the original, was still brighter and more efficient than the lamps then in use in the United States (figure 1).



Figure 1. Winslow Lewis' Lamp with Reflector and Lens¹⁵

The Lighthouse Board would acknowledge the lamp's deficiencies in 1852 by describing Lewis' lamp as being "of improper dimensions, constructed of...not economical materials, without professional or scientific skill."¹⁶ In 1810, Lewis patented his lamp and two years later signed a seven-year contract worth almost \$30,000 with the

¹⁴ Noble, *Lighthouses & Keepers*, 14.

¹⁵ Light Sources, Lenses Folder, Photos Box 4, Lighthouse Subject Files, U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office, Washington, DC. The curved glass lens located in front (on the left in this illustration) of the light was not part of Argand's design, but an "improvement" by Lewis designed to amplify the light. It was eventually removed from all lamps as experience demonstrated it actually diminished the light.

¹⁶ Light-House Board, *Report*, 8.

federal government to refit all lighthouses with his new lamp and to perform annual maintenance.¹⁷

When Pleasonton assumed charge of the Lighthouse Establishment in 1820, he was drawn to Lewis' scientific and maritime knowledge, as well as to the efficiency of the new lamp. For the next thirty years, Lewis would, with Pleasonton's approval, continue to garner contracts from Congress for supplying oil, building lighthouses and servicing lamps. Pleasonton's desire to save money and Lewis' need to keep government contracts, by offering lower bids for work, reinforced their business relationship at the expense of quality and modernization. Lewis even usurped Pleasonton's authority on at least one occasion when he changed the Mobile Point Light in Alabama from a fixed to a revolving light without prior authorization. Upon questioning by Pleasonton, Lewis responded that the change was necessary to produce the best light and because the new light would not possibly be confused with a nearby revolving light at Pensacola as "to mistake one for the other would be like taking a star for the moon."¹⁸ Pleasonton accepted Lewis' reasoning and subsequently defended the new light against critics, but eventually the Lighthouse Board in 1852 would deem having similar lights so close together a poor decision.¹⁹

Pleasonton's thrifty nature and his reliance on Lewis' knowledge is credited with preventing the United States from seeking and adopting better lighthouse technology, such as more efficient lamps and the Fresnel Lens.²⁰ The Fresnel Lens, invented in

¹⁷ U.S. Light-House Establishment, *Compilation of Public Documents and Extracts from Reports & Papers Relating to Lighthouses... 1789-1871* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1871), 3-6.

¹⁸ Winslow Lewis to Pleasonton, 22 December 1835, in Light-House Establishment, *Compilation of Public Documents*, 16-17.

¹⁹ Francis Ross Holland, *America's Lighthouses: An Illustrated History* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1988), 16.

²⁰ Noble, *Lighthouses & Keepers*, 16-21.

France in 1822 by Augustin Fresnel, was widely adopted in Europe decades before being instituted in the United States by the Lighthouse Board in the 1850s. The design used a cocoon-like system of prisms around the light source to capture and project about eighty percent of the light. In comparison, lamps with reflectors could only harness about twenty percent. Pleasonton preferred the lamp system as they were cheaper to install, but more expensive to maintain, while the Fresnel Lens was initially more expensive, yet required less oil and maintenance.²¹

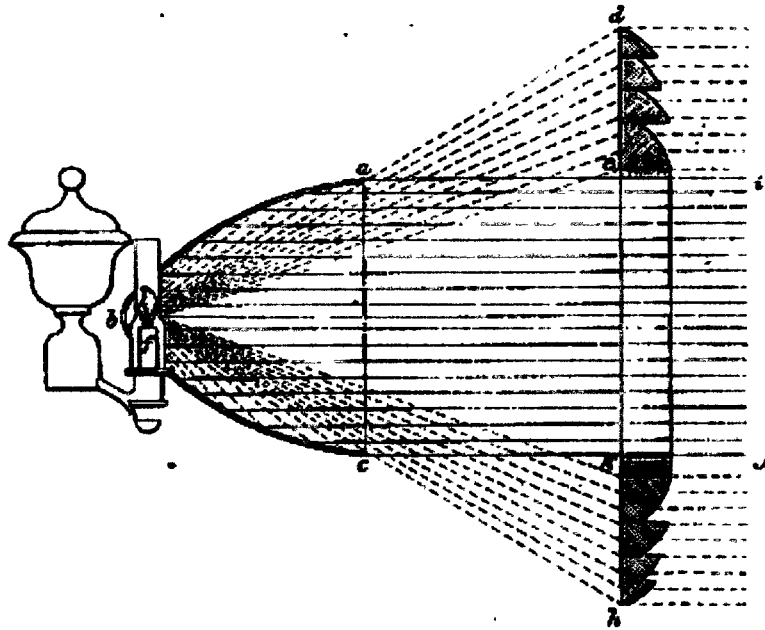


Figure 2. Argand's Lamp with Parabolic Reflector and Fresnel Lens Panel²²

²¹ Light-House Board, *Report*, 118-122. The board computed that if Fresnel Lenses were immediately installed in all the lighthouses, the United States would have a surplus of \$150,040 by the end of the fifth year due to the reduction in lamps and oil usage.

²² Thomas Stevenson, *Lighthouse Illumination: Being a Description of the Holophotal System, and of Azimuthal-Condensing, and Apparent Lights, with Other Improvements* (London, England: John Weale, 1859), 40, figure 20. Notice how the Fresnel Lens captures and focuses light rays that escape from the parabolic reflector. Fresnel Lenses varied in size and illumination strength based on their focal length (the distance of the light source to the focal plane) and were classified from largest to smallest as first, second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth order.

Yet, it may not have been only thrift and poor personal judgment that plagued Pleasonton's administration, but also a bit of patriotic pride bordering on xenophobia, as exhibited in his defense of American lights in 1847:

I would respectively inquire whether it would expedient or politic to rely on a Foreign Government or Country for the means of lighting our extensive Coasts, Lakes and Rivers, whilst the means afforded, and employed, by our own Country are every way adequate to our wants, and satisfactory to all our Navigating people so far as my knowledge extends.²³

Pleasonton's frugality coupled with his dependence on Lewis for technical and maritime advice meant the early Lighthouse Establishment continued to use low quality supplies causing more work for the keeper. Poor lamp design and low quality oil caused soot build up and necessitated wick trimming every few hours. The substandard oil would thicken in cold weather or from impurities, requiring the keeper to preheat the oil and fuss with the lamp. Although lighthouse duties always involved cleaning, Pleasonton's use of substandard lamps required more upkeep and cleaning, causing lighthouse work in America to be even more associated with the daily household tasks performed by women. Pleasonton's refusal to switch to the Fresnel Lens also kept America's lighthouses less technical and professional, making the position of lighthouse keeper not as sought after by healthy men with other employment opportunities in the growing market economy. Pleasonton's thriftiness also caused him to hire thirty-one keepers' widows in order to maintain continuity of the light as well as save money by not spending time on finding a replacement (a phenomenon explored in Chapter Three). The

²³ Pleasonton to John A. Dix (Chairman of the Committee of Commerce), January 1847, Box 7 1840-1849, NC-31 Series 17G Miscellaneous Letters Received 1784-1853, Record Group 26: Records of the U.S. Coast Guard (hereafter RG 26), National Archives & Records Administration, Washington, DC (hereafter NARA). Pleasonton's use of "politic" further gives the connotation of being in the defense of the new U.S. Government.

nature of the work, the low opinion of the occupation and the support of hiring widows opened the position of lighthouse keeper to women in increasing numbers during Pleasonton's administration.

The prevailing work at a lighthouse included tending the light, cleaning lighthouse instruments and buildings, and keeping records of supplies, all traditional women's work. Women had long been associated with maintaining the lights and fires within a home. In Western tradition, this association stretches as far back to ancient Greece where the goddess "Hestia stays at home on Mount Olympus to keep the fires alight."²⁴ During the Early Republic, women continued the practice of maintaining fires for cooking and warmth, as well as candles and lamps for illumination. Both Lydia Maria Child and Catharine Beecher included in their popular domestic instruction manuals instructions on how to make candles, clean and light lamps, and tend cooking fires.²⁵

An instruction sent to lighthouse keepers from the Lighthouse Establishment entitled "Directions for the Burning of Lamp Oil," bears many similarities to Beecher's advice. Keepers were told that "the Canister of the Merchant and the Canister and the Lamp Feeder of the consumer, should always be perfectly clean...the lamp trimmed and the burnt part cut off every day," and that "when oil in small quantities is long exposed to the air, its burning qualities deteriorate."²⁶ This coincides closely with Beecher's advice to housewives: "Cleanse the insides of lamps and oil cans...Trim it after it has been once

²⁴ Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1995), 31. In ancient Greek, 'Εστία literally means "hearth."

²⁵ Catharine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1849), 370-374; Lydia Maria Child, *The American Frugal Housewife: Dedicated to Those who Are Not Ashamed of Economy*, 27th ed. (New York: Samuel S. & William Wood, 1841), 10, 145.

²⁶ Lamp Oil Instructions, circa 1830-1849, Box 5 S-X,Y,Z 1807-1853, NC-31 Series 17F Miscellaneous Letters Received Alphabetical 1801-1852, RG 26, NARA. Sturgis died suddenly early 1850.

used...Oil long kept grows thick and does not burn well.”²⁷ These similarities suggest how the knowledge of tending lamps and caring for oil as a lighthouse keeper could be seen as a natural extension of women’s domestic work. It is furthermore interesting that an instruction had to be sent to all lighthouse keepers explaining these basic lamp-tending fundamentals, indicating that there was some uniform lack of understanding of these skills in the predominately male-filled occupation. One could wonder what the female keepers thought upon receiving such information.

Next to actually tending to the light, keepers had to clean the lamps, reflectors and lantern room windows as well as prepare the wicks and oil for the following night. Since Pleasonton doggedly ignored the far superior illuminating apparatus of the Fresnel Lens, illumination was created by an array of lights and reflectors that were initially cheaper than the Fresnel Lens but were more expensive to maintain.²⁸ The array lights were dim, smoky, and burned unevenly requiring the keepers to continually trim the wicks during the night. The 1835 Instructions to the Keepers of Light Houses went as far as to specify that “the wicks are to be trimmed every four hours, taking care that they are exactly even on top.”²⁹ Whale oil and lard was used for lamp fuel in this early period, both of which congealed at lower temperatures and produced soot, requiring constant cleaning in the lantern room.

Keeping lamps and chimneys clean is another duty that crossed over from the domestic realm to the lighthouse. Beecher instructed housewives: “if every thing after

²⁷ Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 281-282.

²⁸ This is the classical lighthouse lens most people envision. Designed by Augustin Fresnel in 1822, the lens used many glass prisms to bend and focus a single light into a very bright beam. Such lenses were not widely adopted in America until after the Lighthouse Board was created in 1852.

²⁹ Pleasonton, Instructions to the Keepers of Light Houses within the United States, 23 April 1835, Box 2 1843, NC-31 Series 35, Letters Received 1833-1864, RG 26, NARA.

being used is cleansed from oil and then kept neatly it will not be so unpleasant a task as it usually is to take care of lamps... Wash the shade of an astral lamp once a week and the glass chimney oftener... Take the lamp to pieces and cleanse it once a month.”³⁰ This echoes similar orders for keepers “to be careful that the lamps, reflectors, and lanterns, are constantly kept clean, and in order.”³¹ Thus, cleaning the necessary lighting equipment was vital to producing good light, and was a task women would have had experience performing.

Although keepers were given printed instructions, it appears many lights were not properly cared for, as the 1852 Lighthouse Board Report notes that “such knowledge is not imparted to light-keepers, as a general rule, to enable them to keep their lamps, burners and reflectors and lanterns in such order as to insure the best lights.”³² The Lighthouse Board viewed the dissemination of such knowledge from the government to male keepers, and did not take into account the female keepers who had received such education within the home. Pleasonton’s description of keepers “who, for a time do not understand the management of their lamps, and consequently keep bad lights and waste much oil,” further exemplifies the learning curve for new male keepers in charge of lights.³³

Although women may have had an advantage performing lighthouse work, it is apparent such work was regarded as not being very difficult. Even though efficient, bright lights were important for safe navigation and commerce, the labor required to produce such a light was not highly valued. Pleasonton, for example, disparaged

³⁰ Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 282.

³¹ Pleasonton, Instructions to Keepers 1835, Box 2 1843, NC-31 Series 35 Letters Received, RG 26, NARA.

³² Light-House Board, *Report*, 11.

³³ Pleasonton to Thomas Corwin, 7 June 1851, in Light-House Board, *Report*, 270.

keeper's work by stating that "the trimming and cleaning of a small Argand fountain lamp being so simple and self-evident as to be left to the intelligence of the meanest."³⁴

This opinion may explain why Pleasonton did not give as much attention to training keepers, in comparison with the subsequent Lighthouse Board, and also his acceptance of hiring women, who were generally viewed as lacking mechanical knowledge. This view of effortless lamp maintenance contradicts Beecher's belief that "The care of lamps requires so much attention and discretion that many ladies choose to do this work themselves rather than trust it with domestics."³⁵

Maintaining lamps was the primary duty at a lighthouse, but there was also the constant upkeep on the house and grounds including general cleaning, painting, and gathering of supplies. Caring for a lighthouse was a continuous occupation, making it necessary for the keeper to live where he or she worked. Thus, the light station was not just a government job, but also a way of life. This mimicked a farm economy, which was generally the most prevalent home and work lifestyle prior to the industrial revolution. As a result, just like on many farms, "female keepers, wives, and daughters lived in a place that was both their home and their job and therefore felt a commitment that went beyond the normal bounds of female occupation."³⁶ Thus, prior to actually being appointed as keepers, women regularly assisted their husbands and fathers in caring for the light station. If a male keeper was ill or permanently incapacitated, wives and children often took over lighthouse duties while their husband or father remained technically the keeper, so as not to lose their home and income.

³⁴ Pleasonton to W.L.Hodge (Acting Secretary of the Treasury), 3 July 1851, in Light-House Board, *Report*, 279.

³⁵ Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 282.

³⁶ Bromwell, "Mothers of the Sea," 81.

One such family was the Stuarts at Bombay Hook Light in Delaware, where Duncan Stuart was keeper from 1831 to about 1854. Although he remained the official keeper, Stuart's unmarried daughters Margaret and Mary took over from him and were recognized as performing the lighthouse duties "owing to Mr. Stewart's [sic] age and consequent infirmities."³⁷ By 1850, Stuart, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, was almost ninety years old and his daughters were nearing fifty.³⁸ Margaret wrote to Pleasonton shortly before Duncan's death noting that, "Father is very sick and if anything should happen to him we would be glad to keep the house, we have done it for years...we have spent a great deal of our time and labour in fixing the place."³⁹ It is interesting to note that Margaret refers to keeping a "house" and not a "light," further associating the work at a lighthouse with women's housework and not mechanical or physical labor. Furthermore, she alludes to the work required to take care of the place, showing how families were important in the overall upkeep of a lighthouse. Margaret was appointed keeper upon her father's death, and served until resigning in 1862.⁴⁰

³⁷ H.B. Nones (Captain, U.S. Revenue Cutter *Forward*) to William Meredith (Secretary of the Treasury), 13 Apr 1850, Box 9 Sk-TI, A-1 Series 82 Correspondence Concerning Keepers and Assistants, RG 26, NARA.

³⁸ U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850 Federal Census, Duck Creek Hundred, Kent County, Delaware, 15 Aug 1850, 69.

³⁹ Margaret Stuart to Pleasonton, 22 March 1850, Box 9 Sk-TI, A-1 Series 82 Correspondence Concerning Keepers and Assistants, RG 26, NARA.

⁴⁰ Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1373, roll 2 New York to Virginia), NARA. Entry under Bombay Hook records "Miss M. Stuart, 16 Apr 1850-22 Dec 1862, \$450, Resigned." Yet, in a letter that month, the local superintendent of lights writes he did not deliver the commission for Margaret Stuart because Duncan had not died yet and so "therefore I have been unable to deliver the commission and the instructions as directed." Charles Polk to William Meredith, 24 April 1850, Box 6 1850, NC-31 Series 35 Letters Received, RG 26, NARA. The 1852 Lighthouse Board report includes a visit to Bombay Hook Light in 1851 that indicates Duncan Stuart was still living. Yet, the 1853 *Official Register* lists M. Stuart as keeper. Other secondary sources cite her starting in 1854, but without documentation.

During this early period, the lighthouse service furnished some provisions, but almost all keepers found it necessary to have a garden and some livestock.⁴¹ In 1832, Duncan Stuart asked, “weather [sic] government would allow a small stable on the property to shelter my cow from the winter storms.”⁴² Stuart’s language confirms that his family owned the livestock, and suggests how facilities at some light stations were lacking. Kate Moore also described the extra care necessary for survival at Black Rock Harbor Light in Connecticut:

I had a lot of poultry and two cows to care for, and each year raised twenty sheep, doing the sheering myself—and the killing when necessary. You see, in the winter you couldn’t get to land on account of the ice being too thin, or the water too rough. Then in the summer I had my garden to make and keep. I raised all my own stuff, and as we had to depend on rain for our water, quite a bit of time was consumed looking after that.⁴³

This depiction gives substance to the popular romantic image of lighthouse keepers. In reality, the light station was in many instances a farm with a light tower. Thus the daily chores of a working farm would be required to some extent at a lighthouse, causing another crossover from women’s domestic work to duties that supported the light station.

If the mundane tasks of cleaning and tending lights in a lighthouse are viewed as an extension of women’s housework, the accompanying devaluation of such work parallels the general decline in regard given to housework in the antebellum period.

Jeanne Boydston refers to this phenomenon as the “pastoralization of housework,” where

⁴¹ See Susan M. Strasser, “An Enlarged Existence? Technology and Household Work in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Women and Household Labor*, ed. Sarah Fenstermaker Berk (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980), 29-52. The need for home production was also true for most other families in the city or country during the Early Republic. Furthermore, it is unclear if any provisions were given on top of annual pay to keepers before the advent of the Lighthouse Board in 1852, except for possibly isolated stations.

⁴² Duncan Stuart to Pleasonton, 2 July 1832, Box 4 1829-1835, NC-31 Series 171 Correspondence Relating to Appointment of Lighthouse Keepers 1801-1852, RG 26, NARA.

⁴³ “Interview with Kate Moore,” *New York Sunday World*, 1889 as quoted in Clifford and Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights*, 15. Kate’s family moved to the light in 1817, her father had a debilitating stroke in 1819, and Kate kept the light until his death in 1871, becoming head keeper from 1871-1878.

women's unpaid domestic labor was viewed as having no social or economic value in the burgeoning industrial capitalist model that prized the male wage earner.⁴⁴ Stephanie Coontz likewise theorized that although most households remained agricultural during this period, the view of worthy work in a market economy changed because "women's traditional tasks were seen as inconvenient necessities...clearly distinct from the activities that generated cash and economic position."⁴⁵ Thus, the work at a lighthouse during this period, being so closely associated with women's housework, was also not seen as "true" labor.

The assumption that lighthouse work was not physically demanding and thus not real labor is further suggested by men applying for keeper positions, who often pointed out their inability to work in other occupations. In 1849, Charles Middick requested to keep the new light at Milwaukee stating, "I...am now suffering with a disease that prevents my labouring for the support of my family."⁴⁶ The writer clearly states he cannot labor for his family, thus indicating the position of keeper would not demand the same amount of work of other jobs nor the same status. A former keeper of Chatham Lights in Massachusetts, requesting re-appointment, expressed the same sentiments writing, "I should like to have the appointment of keeper of said lights as I am disenabled as to many other kinds of business for a living having lost one leg."⁴⁷ When Caleb Smithers suggested Thomas Harvey for appointment at Mahon River Light in Delaware, he argued Harvey was "rendered unable to labour from being afflicted with the

⁴⁴ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 142-163.

⁴⁵ Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families 1600-1900* (New York: Verso, 1988), 149.

⁴⁶ Charles Middick to William Meredith, 24 March 1849, Box 5 1849, NC-31 Series 35 Letters Received, RG 26, NARA.

⁴⁷ Collins Howes to William Meredith, 20 March 1849, Box 5 1849, NC-31 Series 35 Letters Received, RG 26, NARA.

rheumatism,” and that his appointment would be “a deed of charity.”⁴⁸ Such requests demonstrate the work of a lighthouse keeper was seen as being inferior to other occupations and thus attracted those who were unable to work in other positions. In his 1843 report, I.W.P. Lewis acknowledged this assumption and attributed it to low wages: “one of the greatest disadvantages attendant upon the obtainment of good keepers is the rate of salary allowed, which in this country will not command the service of intelligent men.”⁴⁹

Poor living conditions are another reason why the position of lighthouse keeper may have been generally regarded not as prestigious as other jobs. As keepers lived where they worked, the federal government provided lodging, the type and fortitude of which varied greatly during these early years. In 1831, Daniel Waite at Warwick Neck Light asked the Secretary of the Treasury to purchase extra buildings left by a previous keeper, explaining that the current residence “consists of only two rooms about eleven feet square and a small entry, or passage, which leads to the lantern and to the cellar—I think therefore it must be obvious that some additional building is required to make the situation of Keeper, as comfortable as those of other light houses.”⁵⁰ Early construction contracts were carried out locally, so that there was no uniform lighthouse quality or size. During the Congressional investigation of 1842, engineer I.W.P. Lewis conducted detailed structural evaluations of lighthouses in Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts observing, “the dwellings of the keepers are very similar... rubble-stone

⁴⁸ Caleb Smithers to Henry Hicks, 2 August 1845, Box 4 Fr-I, NC-31 Series 82 Correspondence Concerning Keepers and Assistants, RG 26, NARA.

⁴⁹ I.W.P. Lewis, *Report*, in U.S. Light-House Establishment, *Compilation of Public Documents*, 370.

⁵⁰ Daniel Waite to Louis McLane (Secretary of the Treasury), 17 Dec 1831, Box 5 S-X,Y,Z 1807-1853, NC-31 Series 17F Miscellaneous Letters Received Alphabetical 1801-1852, RG 26, NARA.

walls, shingled roofs, and brick chimneys.”⁵¹ Lewis echoed the keepers’ complaints of leaky roofs, smoky chimneys and brackish potable water. Lewis concluded “the details of the work and materials are of the very roughest description, requiring annual repairs.”⁵² In response to such criticisms, Pleasonton blamed the dilapidated state of lighthouses, and even collapsing towers, on violent weather and poor location.⁵³ Indeed living conditions remained so poor at many lighthouses that the 1852 Lighthouse Board investigation found rough walls and roofs “very open—places a quarter of an inch between the shingles.”⁵⁴ Thus, although keepers did not have to pay for housing out of their salary, such quarters in general during the Early Republic were cramped, poorly built, damp, and smoky.

The threat of violent weather was another circumstance that may have caused men to view the job of lighthouse keeper so poorly. The power of ferocious storms and rushing water affected the physical structures, and took a heavy toll on the keeper, at time causing the death of the keeper or a family member. On 13 March 1832, the ferocious ice sweeping down Hudson River during spring breakup destroyed the Stuyvesant Light. Keeper Volkert Witbeck and some family members were able to survive, but Elizabeth, aged eleven, and Harriet, aged thirteen, perished.⁵⁵ The Witbecks’ bleak situation not only meant the sorrow from losing family members, but physician’s bills and the loss of all household goods as well as their living quarters. When Witbeck’s pay was going to

⁵¹ Lewis, *Report*, in Light-House Establishment, *Compilation of Public Documents*, 358.

⁵² Lewis, *Report*, in Light-House Establishment, *Compilation of Public Documents*, 358.

⁵³ Pleasonton to John P. Kennedy (Chairman of the Committee on Commerce), 13 May 1842, in Light-House Establishment, *Compilation of Public Documents*, 311-315.

⁵⁴ Light-House Board, *Report*, 179.

⁵⁵ New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, “Graveyard Inscriptions from Old Cemetery at Stuyvesant,” *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 27, no. 1 (1896): 43. Other victims of weather include: Joshua Appleby and family at Sand Key Light in Florida (1846 hurricane), and Carmalite Philibert, Keeper of Choctaw Point Light in Alabama, (1852 hurricane). Many other keepers and family members drowned while using the lighthouse’s launch due to weather.

be stopped that October, vice presidential candidate Martin Van Buren beseeched Pleasonton that “if anything can be consistently done for Mr. Whitbeck [sic] it will be rendering a service to an honest and truly unfortunate man.”⁵⁶ The Witbecks would stay on at the rebuilt Stuyvesant Light and Volkert’s widow, Christina, followed him as keeper in 1841 and their daughter, Ann, served from 1853 to 1866.

As these examples demonstrate, beyond annual pay, the physical structure for housing and possibly some intermittent supplies, the keeper had no medical care, retirement or death benefits.⁵⁷ Further, the work women commonly engaged in at home was also the basis of labor at a lighthouse. Women tended the fires and lamps for cooking, warmth and light. They were in charge of the domestic economy for securing supplies, metering out stores and generally making ends meet.⁵⁸ Although vital, housework was devalued by society, and keeping a lighthouse, by extension, also suffered low status.

Serving as a lighthouse keeper during the Early Republic was not highly respected and thus, it was assumed, men with other opportunities in the expanding market would navigate away from a keeper position with its low prestige, shoddy living conditions and meager wages. This entire idea is patently expressed by the Lighthouse Board’s 1852 report where they described the popular belief that a keeper’s position was “an easy berth for the needy, or for those who are incompetent to perform more laborious service.”⁵⁹ Due to the nature of the work, and public perception, many keeper positions were filled

⁵⁶ Martin Van Buren to Pleasonton, 24 Oct 1832, Box 5 S-X,Y,Z 1807-1853, NC-31 Series 17F Miscellaneous Letters Received Alphabetical 1801-1852, RG 26, NARA.

⁵⁷ National Park Service, “Lighthouses: An Administrative History,” U.S. Government, <http://www.nps.gov/maritime/light/admin.htm>. Lighthouse keepers were not civil service employees until 1896, and did not receive retirement benefits until 1918.

⁵⁸ Economy comes from the ancient Greek οἰκονομος meaning “household manager.”

⁵⁹ Light-House Board, *Report*, 65.

by veterans, debilitated men, unskilled political appointees, and in the end, widows and fatherless daughters. When male keepers were away for various reasons, sick, or incapacitated, women family members stepped in to manage the light. Pleasonton's opinion of the low intelligence needed to properly tend a light, as well as his frugality, encouraged the hiring of keepers' widows. Thus, the similarity of lighthouse work to women's work in conjunction with the early administration of the Lighthouse service opened a few keeper positions for certain women.

CHAPTER III

THE EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN AS KEEPERS

Though certain aspects of Lighthouse Establishment administration were conducive to the hiring of women, the social expectations and gender constraints of the Early Republic played a supporting role in the federal appointment of female lighthouse keepers. Gender roles affected the employment options and choices of many women who were not generally expected to work outside the home. When they did work outside the home, women were most readily accepted in positions that were viewed as an extension of their domestic duties. Widows had a particularly difficult time supporting themselves due to the legal and cultural assumption that women were to be economically dependent upon men. The hiring of keepers' widows to perform lighthouse duties similar to women's traditional domestic work demonstrates the strong influence of gender roles on women's labor choices. Cultural constraints would not only affect the employment of women keepers, but also their pay, removal from the job, and recognition.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the new nation pushed its boundaries all the way to the Pacific Ocean, and experienced great economic and demographic growth. The industrialized and burgeoning market economy had some panics but generally boomed, and with "the growth of mills and factories, population shifted to the towns, and the middle-class home became refuge rather than a center of production."¹ As a result, since more families had male members leaving home to earn wages, home and work were increasingly separate. This trend became formalized as the idea of separate spheres, where "women were to confine their attentions to home, family, and religion; men were

¹ Lancaster, "Domesticity," 7.

to venture into the corrupt and corrupting world of wage labor, business, and politics.”²

The separate spheres philosophy was popularized in prescriptive literature by notable authors such as William Alcott, who penned *The Young Wife* in 1836, and Catharine Beecher, who wrote *Treatise on Domestic Economy* in 1841.³ Such ideals were also reported by foreign visitors such as Alexis de Tocqueville who in 1840 observed that “the Americans do not think that man and woman have either the duty or the right to do the same things...they have allowed the social inferiority of woman to subsist, they have done all they could to raise her morally and intellectually to the level of man.”⁴

Tocqueville’s interpretation concluded that such separation lifted women’s status and contributions to society because women held a higher moral role than men, who had to toil in the world of economics and politics.

Prescriptive literature asserting these gender ideals abounded, but that did not indicate women experienced such cut and dry social lives. In the introduction to her 1863 book *The Employments of Women*, Virginia Penny decried this disparity: “Socially, morally, mentally, and religiously, she is written about; but not as a working, every-day reality, in any other capacity than that pertaining to home life.”⁵ Penny pointed out that the women from “working-class and poor families, and thus most families of

² Zagarri, “Women and Party Conflict in the Early Republic,” in *Beyond the Founders*, eds. Pasley, Robertson, and Waldstreicher 119. For more on separate spheres ideology see Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand & Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers & Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); Kerber, “Separate Spheres;” Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986); Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1975).

³ Lancaster, “Domesticity,” 8.

⁴ *Alexis de Tocqueville on Democracy, Revolution and Society*, eds. John Stone and Stephen Mennell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 126.

⁵ Virginia Penny, *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopaedia of Woman’s Work* (Boston: Walker, Wise & Co., 1863), vi.

color...could not realize the domestic ideal of womanhood,” and had to find work away from home to support themselves and their families.⁶ Still, the domestic ideal was most easily attained by white urban middle and upper class women, and the prescribed gender roles were the “standard” by which the “true womanhood” of women was judged, regardless of ethnicity, economic status or location.⁷ Thus, even though “separate spheres ideology...was a normative ideal rather than a descriptive construct,” women’s employment options were limited because the same gender roles that prescribed their absence from the male-dominated labor market also meant women’s labor was considered to be supplemental, resulting in fewer jobs and lower pay.⁸

The popular ideals of true womanhood dictated that the occupations most readily available to women were a natural extension of her domestic duties. Thus, women worked in textile mills, nursed the sick, ran boarding houses, were domestics, and taught school.⁹ Since many lighthouse duties closely echoed traditional housekeeping, women lighthouse keepers were viewed as extending their socially acceptable roles. The lack of pejorative articles, literature, reports, cartoons, or songs about women lighthouse keepers during the Early Republic suggests that although they were employed in typically male positions, the women keepers were seen as existing within cultural ideals. Indeed, the few extant cultural documents about women and lighthouses reinforced social roles by

⁶ Amott and Matthaiei, *Race, Gender, and Work*, 105.

⁷ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 151-152. Welter described the attributes of True Womanhood as “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”

⁸ Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 135; Amott and Matthaiei, *Race, Gender and Work*, 104-105. Zagari further argues that the inability of a post-revolutionary patriarchal society to extend equal rights to women coupled, with frantic industrialization, evolving political parties, and an untrustworthy economy, led to the idea of separate spheres as an effort to give order to a swiftly changing world.

⁹ Lisa Wilson, *Life After Death: Widows in Pennsylvania 1750-1850* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992), 63-66; Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 100-101; Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1999), 44; Bromwell, “Mothers of the Sea,” 65-66.

mixing the symbolism of a light that guides ships to safety with that of a stoic woman who guides her family. The sensational story of Grace Darling, a light keeper's daughter in Great Britain, who with her father in September 1838 saved wrecked mariners, found worldwide acclaim.¹⁰ *Godey's Lady's Book* featured Darling in a May 1839 article, noting that her "personal bravery and merit" caused her name to be "on all lips as a theme of praise."¹¹ There were five women serving as principal keeper in the United States during the Grace Darling episode, but they do not appear to have been singled out as special.¹² This may have been because their numbers were small and their existence was largely unknown beyond local circles. Also during this period, American women keepers had not been involved in any similar high-profile rescues that would have propelled them to national fame like Grace Darling.

Another rare example of women and lighthouses in contemporary literature is found in the 1854 edition of *Noble Deeds of American Women*, which described Kate Moore, the daughter of the keeper at Black Rock Harbor Light in Connecticut, as "ever ready to lend a helping hand, and shrinks from no danger, if duty points that way."¹³ Moore was identified as being involved in daring rescues with her father, although the purpose of the biographical sketch was to emphasize Moore's steadfast support of her family. It is important to note that both Grace Darling and Kate Moore were daughters of

¹⁰ *Women In World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia, Volume 4*, ed. Anne Commire (Detroit, MI: Yorkin Publications, 2002), s.v. "Grace Darling."

¹¹ "Miss Grace Horsley Darling," *Godey's Lady's Book*, May 1839, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Accessible Archives Database via Old Dominion University Library, <http://www.lib.odu.edu>.

¹² Ann Davis (Pt. Lookout, MD); Elizabeth Smith (Old Field Pt., NY); Barbara Mabrity (Key West, FL); Elizabeth Riley (North Pt., MD); and Eliza Daboll (Morgan Pt., CT). Also possibly Abby Waite (Warwick Neck, RI).

¹³ Jesse Clement, ed., *Noble Deeds of American Women: With Biographical Sketches of Some of the More Prominent* (Auburn: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1854), 298. Kate Moore kept the light for her infirmed father, and received official appointment in 1871. This parallels the story of Ida Lewis who kept Lime Rock Light for her sick father 1857-1872, then mother 1872-1879, before finally becoming keeper 1879-1911. She was championed as "America's Grace Darling" for a famous rescue in 1869.

lighthouse keepers, although Moore would be officially appointed principal keeper in 1871. The daughters' familial status fit with the popular literature of the era and reinforced the patriarchal home.

The prevailing social ideals of the Early Republic, popularly termed separate spheres, had both positive and negative consequences in regard to the employment of women as lighthouse keepers. Keepers' widows were hired as lighthouse keepers for expediency and as a type of welfare because of social constraints that limited a widow's employment and wages. Analysis of the familial status of female lighthouse keepers reveals that women keepers were overwhelmingly widows or daughters of recently deceased male keepers. Out of the fifty-three women identified as principal lighthouse keepers during the four decades before the Civil War, forty-three (81%) were widows appointed to their husband's position (Appendix A). Another four (7%) were relatives living with the widowed light keepers (three daughters and one widowed sister). The remaining twelve women can be categorized thus: a widow with no family association (2 or 4%), a married woman with unknown family status (2 or 4%), an unmarried woman with family association (1 or 2%), and a woman with unknown status (1 or 2%). These data demonstrate that the women hired in their own right as keeper were overwhelmingly widows of male keepers who had died while performing lighthouse duties or of illness or an accident.

There appear to be two key reasons for the preponderance of widows and family members among the women lighthouse keepers. The first was the need to have a competent person quickly fill the empty position. Stephen Pleasonton, the administrator of the Lighthouse Establishment from 1820 to 1852, explained to his superior in 1851:

“So necessary is it that the lights should be in the hands of experienced keepers, that I have, in order to effect that object as far as possible, recommend, on the death of a keeper, that his widow, if steady and respectable, should be appointed to succeed him; and in this way some thirty widows have been appointed.”¹⁴ Widows were already trained for the job since not only were the majority of a keeper’s daily tasks, such as cleaning and tending lamps, routine housework, but they had very likely assisted their husband in their daily round-the-clock duties. To the parsimonious Pleasonton, who wore many administrative hats, the appointment of a widow was a smooth and frugal transition for all concerned.

The second impetus for the hiring of widows and female family members as lighthouse keepers was the prevailing social view that widows and orphans were economically dependent and deserving of charity. This reality was supported by the legal restrictions on women that made them subservient to husbands in marriage and heirs in widowhood, and social restrictions that limited women’s ability to earn a living wage. Upon marriage, a woman formally entered a dependent status referred to as coverture where “her legal identity became folded into that of her husband.”¹⁵ When her husband died, the widow was released from the legal restrictions of coverture and assumed a *feme sola* status that meant she was not legally dependent on a man. Widows, however, remained financially and socially dependent on other family members and heirs because they generally were not legally guaranteed to receive the entire estate, and the economic

¹⁴ Pleasonton to Thomas Corwin, 7 June 1851, in Light-House Board, *Report*, 270.

¹⁵ Dorothy A. Mays, *Women in Early America: Struggle, Survival, and Freedom in a New World* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO, 2004), 91.

reality was such that the inheritance would normally not ensure financial stability.¹⁶

Thus, widows most likely experienced more financial hardship than other women during the Early Republic.

The social mores of the Early Republic further complicated widows' lives by associating femininity with domesticity, making it harder for widows to find ways to earn a living wage in the public world. As a result, many women found the need to take on various other jobs or take over their husband's occupation after his death or while he was away.¹⁷ Even though widows could legally form contracts and start businesses, their ability to earn a living wage was limited by social pressure and familial obligations. This reality was clearly expressed by the New York Society for the Relief of Poor Widows in 1826: "what can a bereaved widow do, with 5, or 6 little children, destitute of every means of support but what her own hands can furnish (which in a general way does not amount to more than 25 cents a day)."¹⁸ Thus, the inheritance restriction on widows coupled with a narrow field of options for occupations that would garner sustainable wages made women dependent upon male family members and public or private charity.¹⁹ This was thought to be so universally true that one historian has written, "Widowhood was virtually synonymous with impoverishment."²⁰

The case of Amy Buddington at Stratford Point Light in Connecticut elucidates the fragile economic position of keepers' widows and the importance of the local community's support for a woman seeking to be hired as a keeper or to maintain a keeper

¹⁶ Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 140-184.

¹⁷ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 154.

¹⁸ Minute Books, November 16, 1826, Society for the Relief of Poor Widows, as quoted in Stansell, *City of Women*, 71-72.

¹⁹ Wilson, *Life After Death*, 59, 101-104.

²⁰ Stansell, *City of Women*, 12. Lisa Wilson contends, "for poor women, widowhood simply exacerbated the poverty they had known while married." Wilson, *Life After Death*, 59.

position. The Buddington family kept the light beginning with the appointment of Samuel in 1844. After his death in 1848, his wife Amy was appointed as keeper.²¹ A year later, amongst political wrangling, a letter written to the Secretary of the Treasury on Amy Buddington's behalf described how "she is a poor woman, has a large family, with no other home for herself and children, and no other means of support," and asserted that "it is concluded by all that the light has never been kept in better order than it has been since her appointment."²² Buddington retained her appointment, and thus her family's lodging and support, until 1861.

A similar occurrence at Chatham Lights in Massachusetts further demonstrates the forlorn prospects of keepers' widows and how the federal government helped solve their problem. The Nickerson family moved into the lighthouse in 1845, when Simeon was appointed keeper at an annual salary of \$400. Upon his death three years later, his wife Angeline received his appointment.²³ In 1849, a letter of support written to the new president, Zachary Taylor, stressed both Angeline's precarious situation and worthiness: "Mr. Nickerson...left at his decease a destitute family. The appointment of his widow as far as I know gave general satisfaction...she has discharged the duties devolving upon her as Keeper of the Light in a most careful and faithful manner, and no charge of neglect or want of fidelity can be sustained against her."²⁴ Angeline and her four children were able to remain at Chatham Lights, and she served as keeper until 1862.

²¹ *Official Register of the United States* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 1849), 115. Amy Buddington was appointed 2 March 1848.

²² Phelps to William Meredith, 21 March 1849, Box 5 1849, NC-31 Series 35 Letters Received, RG 26, NARA.

²³ *Official Register*, 1849, 113. Angeline Nickerson was appointed 9 October 1848.

²⁴ Joshua Nickerson to President Zachary Taylor, 11 Apr 1849, Box 5 1849, NC-31 Series 35 Letters Received, RG 26, NARA.

The same cultural ethos that ordained women to be dependent, also required men to be providers and protectors. The letters written on behalf of Amy Buddington and Angeline Nickerson both called attention to the widows' destitute status and the importance of the keeper's position for the family's survival. A petition for the appointment of Michaela Ingraham at Pensacola Light in Florida similarly focused on her destitute status, citing the "unfortunate large, and helpless family, whose situation claims the sympathy of all acquainted with them."²⁵ This petition, signed by the "Citizens of Escambia County," also indicates how the local community's familiarity with and support of women keepers was important in helping the women secure or maintain an appointment. The men who wrote letters of support for Amy Buddington, Angeline Nickerson and Michaela Ingraham may also have included details of the widows' needy status to impart to the lighthouse administrator that it was a social obligation to provide for the widows.²⁶ A letter supporting the continued employment of Susan Harvey at Mahon River Light in Delaware made this connection explicit: "Mrs. Harvey is a widow with four children depending upon her for support and no call can appeal more strongly to the sympathies of all good men who are disposed to protect "the widowed and the fatherless."²⁷ Written by the captain of a U.S. Revenue Cutter, this letter again emphasizes the local knowledge and support of women keepers. Thus, the hiring of

²⁵ Citizens of Escambia County to Robert Mitchell (Collector of Customs), 10 September 1840, Box 4 Fr-I, NC-31 Series 82 Correspondence Concerning Keepers and Assistants, RG 26, NARA.

²⁶ It is also interesting this theme of invoking the poor status of widows was used as a persuasive device in letters written to officials at various levels in the hierarchy of lighthouse management: President Zachary Taylor, Secretary of the Treasury William Meredith, 5th Auditor of the Treasury Stephen Pleasonton, and Collector of Customs Robert Mitchell. This further indicates the widespread acceptance of widows' destitution and support from the local community.

²⁷ H.B. Nones (U.S. Revenue Marine) to Pleasonton, 1 May 1849, Box 4 Fr-I, NC-31 Series 82 Correspondence Concerning Keepers and Assistants, RG 26, NARA. The underlined emphasis may be a biblical reference highlighting the important duty to give protection: "And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart." Zech. 7:10, also mentioned in Ps. 68:5, and variously in Deuteronomy.

widows was justified as a way to provide a pension or welfare for families whose male breadwinner had died in federal employment. The local community supported this “federal welfare” through letters and petitions for the female keepers as it would be immoral to allow respectable, hard-working women to become destitute.

Just as the public image of destitute widowhood helped women gain employment as lighthouse keepers, the new status of supported wife upon remarriage caused them to lose their appointments. Once remarried, a widow was legally subservient to her husband, exempt from public charity and expected to focus on maintaining her home. Between 1820 and 1859, at least four widowed female keepers remarried: Rachel Wolcott, Rebecca Flaherty, Susan Harvey and Charlotte Layton. In each case, either the new husband was appointed keeper, or the women were dismissed.

In 1822, schoolteacher Rachel Miller married Benajah Wolcott, a Revolutionary War veteran, who that year was chosen the first keeper of Marblehead Light in Ohio, at the west end of Lake Erie. In 1832, Benajah sadly succumbed to one of the first cholera outbreaks of the nineteenth century. Rachel was appointed principal keeper in his stead on 25 October 1832, becoming the first female head keeper on the Great Lakes. When Rachel married widower Jeremiah Van Benschoten in 1834, he was appointed the new keeper, and remained in that position until 1842.²⁸ Perhaps Rachel was relieved to tend to her house and not the light as well; either way, social and legal convention made that decision for her.

²⁸ Keeper’s House Committee, “The Keeper’s House: History,” Ottawa County Historical Society, <http://www.thekeepershouse.org/>; *Official Register*, 1835, 69; William Henry Van Benschoten, *Concerning the Van Bunschoten or Van Benschoten Family in America* (Poughkeepsie, NY: A.V. Haight Co., 1907), 263; U.S. Coast Guard, “Historic Light Stations,” U.S. Government, http://www.uscg.mil/history/web/light_houses/USCGLightList.asp.

Rebecca Flaherty (who is discussed at length in Chapter Four) served with her husband, John, at Sand Key Light in Florida. Upon John's death in 1830, Rebecca tended the light for four years before remarrying in 1834. As with Rachel Wolcott, Rebecca Flaherty's new husband was appointed keeper, and Rebecca was effectively fired.

Susan Harvey, keeper of Mahon River Light on the western side of the Delaware Bay, also lost her job when she remarried. Thomas Harvey replaced John Smith in 1845 due to the new political administration of President James Polk. When Thomas died later that year, his twenty-eight year old widow, Susan, was appointed as principal keeper.²⁹ During Susan Harvey's ten years as keeper, there were multiple letters and petitions submitted for her retention and removal. In 1850, Susan refuted a negative petition, earnestly stating, "I have been faithful in discharging my duty in that which has been placed in my charge."³⁰ The situation was resolved upon Susan's 1855 marriage to William Frazier. As explained in a letter dated 4 December from the Delaware Superintendent of Lights to the Secretary of the Treasury: "I have the honor to nominate for your approval Thomas I. Catts as Keeper of Mahon Light House...Mrs. Susan Harvey the present incumbent having been recently married to a man named Frazier."³¹ Mr.

²⁹ Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1373, roll 2 New York to Virginia), NARA. Thomas E. Harvey to Henry Hicks, 7 July 1845, Box 4 Fr-I, NC-31 Series 82 Correspondence Concerning Keepers and Assistants, RG 26, NARA. Thomas Harvey claimed the animosity was from John Smith's political affiliations that changed with popular opinion coupled with his years at the lighthouse. This same Box 4 contains many letters and petitions involving this position.

³⁰ Susan Harvey to Thomas Corwin, 10 February 1850, Box 4 Fr-I, NC-31 Series 82 Correspondence Concerning Keepers and Assistants, RG 26, NARA.

³¹ Jesse Tharpe to James Guthrie (Secretary of the Treasury), 4 December 1855, Box 2 C-Cu, NC-31 Series 82 Correspondence Concerning Keepers and Assistants, RG 26, NARA; "Wm. Frazier," U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860 Federal Census, Little Creek Hundred, Kent County, Delaware, 18 June 1860, 146.

Catts was duly appointed keeper of Mahon River Light three days later.³² Such evidence demonstrates how changing marital status directly affected the appointments of female keepers during this period, and that the social obligation to support the widow ended upon remarriage.

Finally, Charlotte Layton (also discussed fully in Chapter Four) was a keeper's widow who also lost her job upon remarriage. Charlotte followed her husband Charles to California where he was the first keeper at Monterey's Point Pinos Lighthouse. After his death in November 1855, Charlotte kept the light for four years before marrying George Harris in 1860, at which time Harris was appointed keeper. Although direct evidence of women being removed from keeping lights upon remarriage exists only in the case of Susan Harvey, it is clear from the historical pattern that the cultural and legal constraints upon women also resulted in Rachel Wolcott, Rebecca Flaherty and Charlotte Layton losing their positions upon remarriage.

The experiences of the women lighthouse keepers exemplify how gender ideals of the Early Republic marginalized women in a position overwhelmingly held by and marketed to males. In a letter to the Secretary of the Treasury requesting that a keeper's widow remain during the winter at Eagle Island Light in Maine, the writer mentions that friends "understood there had been instances of the kind."³³ This letter demonstrates that as late as 1848, the idea of a woman lighthouse keeper was still seen as outside the norm. Although Virginia Penny included in her 1863 encyclopedia "Lighthouse Keepers" as a possible occupation for women, the short entry related only two stories: the appointment

³² Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1373, roll 2 New York to Virginia), NARA.

³³ Duman Harden Jr to Robert Walker (Secretary of the Treasury), 31 March 1848, Box 4 1844 & 1848, NC-31 Series 35 Letters Received, RG 26, NARA.

of Lydia Smith as Assistant Keeper of Manitou Island Light in Michigan, and the assistance of Kate Moore (daughter of the keeper of Black Harbor Rock Light in Connecticut) in a rescue of two men from an overturned boat.³⁴ Neither of Penny's examples indicates that "Lighthouse Keeper" was a realistic profession for women. In fact, her omission of any discussion of contemporary women lighthouse keepers suggests that as late as 1863, the notion of a woman working as a lighthouse keeper was not a popular concept. Since women were not expected to hold the position of lighthouse keeper, and the women keepers' work was performed essentially at home, away from other male wageworkers, the female keepers were for all intents and purposes invisible within the Lighthouse Establishment and American society.

An indicator that women keepers were disregarded at the organizational level and therefore rendered invisible is the pre-printing of office forms with exclusively male identifiers. The *List of Appointments of Lighthouse Keepers* for 1833-1838 includes copies of appointments sent to the new keepers.³⁵ The pre-printed form begins with the salutation "Sir," which for female appointees, such as Eliza Daboll and Elizabeth Riley, was crossed out, and "Madam" written in its place. This was still the case two decades later in the *Notices of Removal* and *Notices of Appointments* from 1849 to 1855.³⁶ Again, the printed "Sir" was crossed out and a handwritten "Madam" was inserted as needed for female appointments and removals. A few writers cunningly worked the bottom swirl of the "S" in "Sir" into a flamboyant "M" in "Madam" to disguise the original salutation. The later documents were not surplus stock from earlier times, as the phrase "at a salary

³⁴ Penny, *Employments of Women*, 405-406.

³⁵ Book 1833-1838, NC-31 Series 100 List of Appointments of Light-House Keepers 1832-1860, RG 26, NARA

³⁶ NC-31 Series 96, Notices of Removal 1850-1855; NC-31 Series 99, Notices of Appointments 1849-1855, RG 26, NARA.

of” had been added to the form. Thus, during the three decades under study, not only were the appointment and removal forms geared exclusively towards male employees, but even when the forms were updated, they ignored the existence of female keepers.

This invisibility of female keepers within the Lighthouse Establishment was ironically beneficial to the women as they received equal or superior pay to their male counterparts. A systematic review of the *Official Register of the United States* for the years 1830 to 1859 confirms that women keepers were paid on par or better than male keepers (Appendix B, Tables 1-3).³⁷ This contradicts the usual practice that women who earned wages outside the home during the Early Republic generally earned less than men because “the temporary and supplementary nature of white women’s wage earning helped employers justify their segregation into lower paid, dead-end jobs.”³⁸ Since women’s labor was valued less by society, jobs open to them were not generally in competition with male workers. In areas where tension existed between genders, male laborers demanded higher wages to offset the female encroachment.³⁹ Neither was the case for women keepers, who worked away from other men within their own homes.

Congress established compensation for keepers, but because women generally were not sought as keepers, separate pay was not established. Congress most likely, just as society in general and the Lighthouse Establishment, did not “see” the women lighthouse keepers. Creating differentiable pay tables based upon gender would, in effect, acknowledge the hiring of women as an accepted practice. By not acknowledging their gender, Congress reinforced the cultural roles that stipulated women were to focus

³⁷ *Official Register of the United States*, 13 vols (Washington, DC: Department of State, 1830-1859). This annual, and then biennial report, first ordered by Congress in 1816, cataloged all the federal employees including location and salary and became known as the “Blue Book.”

³⁸ Amott and Mattaei, *Race, Gender and Work*, 105; Rockman, *Scraping By*, 102.

³⁹ Boydston, *Home and Work*, 154-155.

on domestic matters and only be employed in supplemental positions.⁴⁰ Instead, pay was based upon the labor required at a particular light station and not the gender of a keeper.

Lighthouses varied depending upon their function with larger light stations requiring more work and employees, while a lone keeper could tend a smaller light that had fewer lamps. As a result, keepers were paid based upon the size and type of lighthouse they maintained. The keeper's annual salary was also affected by the location of a light. Keepers at remote stations, who had to endure additional hardship due to isolation and lack of supplies, were paid more than those tending similar lighthouses closer to civilization and provisions. As a result, the women who on average filled about five percent of the head keeper positions during the years 1830 to 1859 received equal pay as an ironic result of their anonymity. This very invisibility, however, also resulted in a diminished legacy for the women lighthouse keepers, whose existence and hard work was relatively unknown during the Early Republic.

During the Early Republic, prescribed gender roles affected the employment, pay, removal, and acknowledgement of women hired as lighthouse keepers. The hiring of female keepers was deemed culturally acceptable because lighthouse work had many similarities to domestic duties. Further, the majority of women appointed as lighthouse keepers were keepers' widows, who had an acceptable claim upon society for assistance. Once hired, female keepers enjoyed atypical pay compared to other working women by earning the same or better salary as male keepers. Congress determined pay and did not have separate scales based upon gender as that would acknowledge an accepted practice

⁴⁰ In a similar vein, when the government instituted uniforms for lighthouse employees in the late nineteenth century, there was no garment designated for a female keeper, and women keepers were certainly not expected to don the male uniform, thus continuing the practice of making women keepers "invisible." Arnold Burges Johnson, *The Modern Light-House Service* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1890), 104.

of hiring women in stereotypically male positions. Although a welcomed benefit, the parity of pay demonstrates how the separate spheres ideal caused female lighthouse keepers to become invisible within society and the Lighthouse Establishment. This is evident both by the lack of knowledge of the women during the time period, the congressional setting of compensation and even the simple standardization of Lighthouse Establishment documents.

CHAPTER IV

THE KEEPERS

Social conditions of the Early Republic combined with the early organization of the Lighthouse Establishment to encourage the hiring of women as principal lighthouse keepers. Between 1820 and 1859, women averaged five percent of the workforce, suggesting that the hiring of female keepers was a relatively constant practice. The average length of service for all women was ten years indicating women served as lighthouse keepers for long periods in contrast to the often short-term employment available to most women during this period. Women earned salaries equal to male keepers because keepers were paid according to the size of light they kept, and not because of their sex. Women also kept lights along all of America's coasts, implying that the hiring of women as head lighthouse keepers was a national phenomenon. A closer look at the experiences of three keepers illustrates the interaction of lighthouse administration and cultural constraints with the realities of surviving in the Early Republic.

Fifty-three women were hired between 1820 and 1859, with the appointments and discharges increasing each decade (table 1). A complete list of the women keepers, including dates of employment, location and familial status, can be found in Appendix A. Out of all the keepers between 1820 and 1859, women on average made up five percent of the principal lighthouse keepers, indicating a steady employment trend. These numbers reveal it was during Stephen Pleasonton's administration of the Lighthouse Establishment from 1820 to 1852, that women were appointed keepers. As argued above, 90.5% (48) of

the women were widows or daughters of keepers, with 81% (43) the widow of the incumbent keeper. Pleasonton's willingness to hire widows was a principal factor that encouraged the continued employment of an increasing number of women over the four decades. After 1852, the new Lighthouse Board curtailed this procedure by ordering that "females and servants are not to be employed in the management of lights, except by the special authority of the Department."¹ This could help explain why almost as many women keepers were discharged (removed or resigned) as were appointed during the 1850s. Still, the two longest serving women, Nancy Rose at Stony Point, New York (forty-seven years) and Catherine Murdock at Rondout Creek, New York (fifty years), were both appointed in 1857 upon the death of their husbands.

Table 1. Number and Length of Employment of Women Keepers, 1820-1859

Decade	Appointed	Discharged	Average Service Length (Years)
1820	1	1	1
1830	8	3	15.6
1840	19	7	8.5
1850	25	24	9.7
Total	53	35	10

The data available for the female keepers suggests that most were middle-aged, and their facility with language and writing skill indicates a fair amount of education and a middle-class status. A look at a representative sample of the age of women upon appointment as keeper demonstrates the women varied in age from their twenties to

¹ Pleasonton to Thomas Corwin, 7 June 1851, in *Light-House Board, Report*, 270.

fifties, with an average age of forty-one.² This range suggests the widows had various amounts of life experience, but it is unclear how such knowledge influenced their ability to actively pursue federal employment. Letters written by female keepers to Stephen Pleasonton, and various Secretaries of the Treasury, reveal a solid grasp of spelling, grammar and sentence structure, indicating the majority of women keepers were educated and most likely part of the middle class. This status may have encouraged the women to be proactive in soliciting a keeper position, and once held, in requesting supplies or repairs.

As discussed in the Chapter Three, women lighthouse keepers were paid on par with or better than male keepers. The pay information for all keepers gleaned from the *Official Register* for 1835, 1845 and 1855 is listed in Appendix B, Tables 1-3. These years were chosen as representative samples to uncover what, if any, pay patterns existed between male and female lighthouse keepers, and suggest that pay rates were comparable between the sexes with salaries determined by the location and size of the lighthouse and not on the sex of the keeper.

In 1835, Elizabeth Smith at Old Field Point Light in New York earned \$350, the same annual rate as ninety-four male keepers (Appendix B, Table 1). The salaries for both sexes ranged from \$250 to \$600, with the greatest number (97, including both sexes, or 52% of all keepers) earning \$350 annually. Men filled 97% (182 of 187) of the head lighthouse keeper positions. Their salaries fell into three pay categories as follows (percentages are of total males): \$250-\$375 (102, or 56%), \$400-\$460 (53, or 29%), and \$500-\$600 (27, or 15%). A similar breakdown of compensation for the five women is

² Amelia Dewees (39), Rebecca Flaherty (32), Mary Foster (47), Susan Harvey (28), Charlotte Layton (31), Clarinda Mott (55), Martha Nuthall (42), Elizabeth Smith (46), Margaret Stuart (50), Harriet Towner (46).

(percentages are of total females): \$300-\$375 (3, or 60%), \$400-\$460 (none), and \$500-\$600 (2, or 40%).

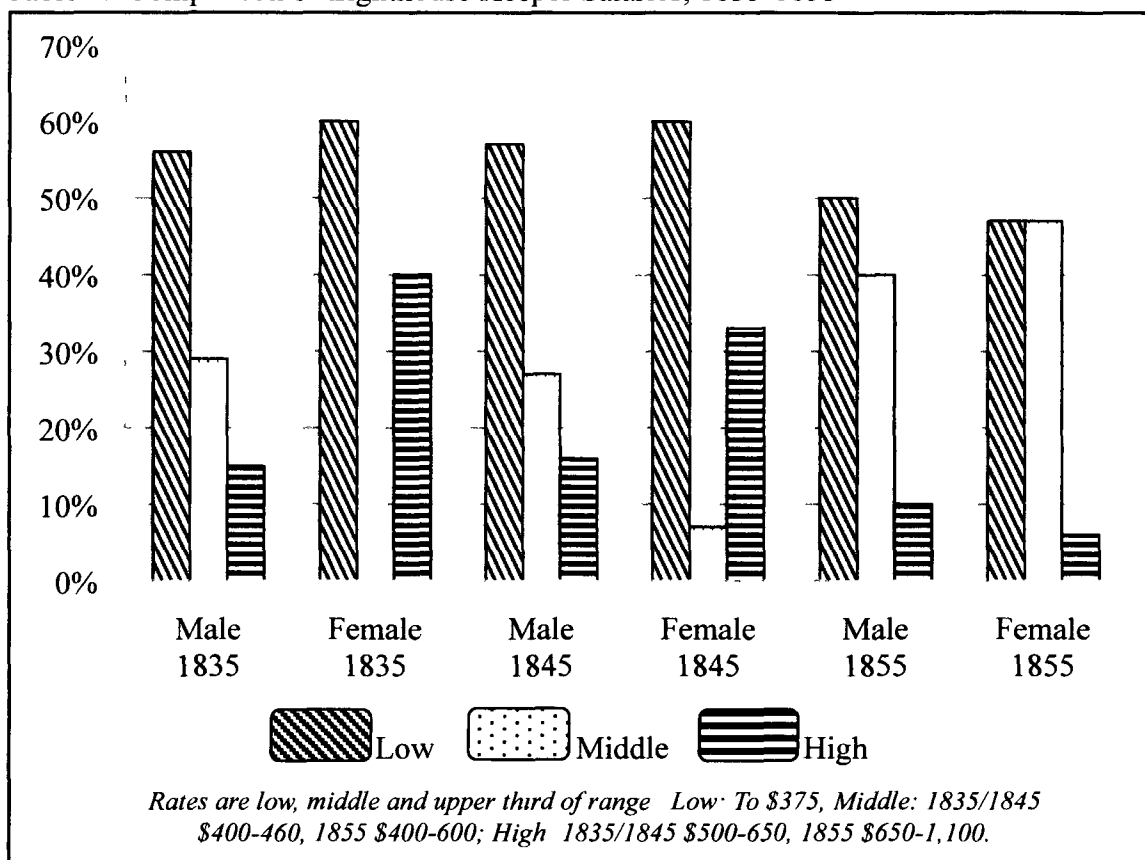
The 1835 figures show how women's pay rates were comparable to men's salaries, with the greatest proportion of both sexes earning between \$250 and \$375 (table 2). Yet, one of the highest paid keepers in 1835 was Elizabeth Riley at North Point, Maryland, who earned \$600 for attending a station with two lights.

By 1845, the total number of keepers had risen by 26% percent to 235 (Appendix B, Table 2). There were fifteen women serving as principal keeper, representing an increase of 300% from 1835. This increase may partially be explained by Pleasonton's widow-friendly policy and by the increased age of the mostly infirm veterans serving as keepers. In 1845, salaries for both sexes ranged from \$300 to \$600, with the greatest number (129, including both sexes, or 55% of all keepers) earning \$350 annually.³ Men filled 94% (220 of 235) of the head lighthouse keeper positions. Their salaries fell into three pay categories as follows (percentages are of total males): \$300-\$375 (126, or 57%), \$400-\$460 (59, or 27%), and \$500-\$650 (35, or 16%).⁴ A similar breakdown of compensation for the fifteen women is as follows (percentages are of total females): \$300-\$375 (9, or 60%), \$400-\$460 (1, or 7%), and \$500-\$600 (5, or 33%). The 1845 figures also demonstrate that keepers' salaries were comparable between the sexes, with the greatest proportion of both sexes earning between \$300 and \$375 (table 2).

³ See note in Appendix B, Table 2 for information on the salary range in 1845.

⁴ For statistical purposes the extra pay denoted in Appendix B, Table 3 is included in the higher pay category of \$500-\$650.

Table 2. Comparison of Lighthouse Keeper Salaries, 1835-1855



Source: *Official Register of the United States*, 1835, 1845 and 1855.

A decade later in 1855, there were 357 keeper positions representing an increase of 122 (52%) over 1845 and 170 (92%) over 1835 (Appendix B, Table 3). Women keepers increased by four to nineteen, an increase of 21% from 1845. Pay continued to be distributed based upon the location and function of the lighthouse and not on the sex of the keeper. In 1855, the pay rates for both genders ranged from \$100 to \$1,100 with the greatest number (158, including both sexes, or 44% of all keepers) earning \$350 annually. Men filled 95% (338 of 357) of the head lighthouse keeper positions. Their salaries fell into three pay categories as follows (percentages are of total males): \$100-

\$375 (170, or 50%), \$400-\$550 (134, or 40%), \$600-\$1,100 (34, or 10%).⁵ A similar breakdown of compensation for the nineteen women is as follows (percentages are of total females): \$100-\$375 (9, or 47%), \$400-\$550 (9, or 47%), and \$600-\$1,100 (1, or 6%). These figures continue to demonstrate that women keepers were paid similar rates to their male counterparts (table 2).

The comparative analysis of salaries for male and female keepers from 1835, 1845, and 1855 demonstrate that during these three decades women were paid similar rates to male keepers with the majority of all keepers earning the lower rates. This contradicts the prevalent work experience for women during the Early Republic who worked in lower-paid, marginalized jobs or earned less than men when working in the same occupation.⁶ The preponderance of lower salaries matches the larger number of small lighthouses that required less work. This confirms the pay schedule set by Congress was tied to the type and size of lighthouse and not to the gender of the keeper. Women were not banished within their occupation to the smallest lights with the lowest pay, but worked in different lighthouses along the coasts causing them to earn various pay rates. If women keepers had been separated out by their sex, they would have only been at the smaller lights earning the lowest wage.

Although women were paid equal to men for their work as lighthouse keepers, it is important to note that salaries did not change between the tenure of one keeper to the next. Women were not paid a different salary when assuming a new position, nor were men who came after them automatically paid more. Michaela Ingraham at Pensacola

⁵ These mirror the original three categories used in 1835 and 1845, but include lower and higher wages. The ranges are based on the lower, middle and upper third of pay.

⁶ Linda K. Kerber, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 108.

Light was paid five hundred fifty dollars annually from 1840 until 1855, the same salary as her deceased husband. Her son-in-law, Joseph Palmer, earned the same pay when he became keeper upon Mrs. Ingraham's death. From 1850 until 1854, Ann Dudley at St. Marks Light earned four hundred fifty dollars, the same as her late husband. Dudley's replacement earned the same amount, solidifying the fact that pay did not change with the sex of the keeper.⁷ This did not just occur in Florida, but was a national policy.

Examination of the *Official Register of the United States* for the years 1830 to 1859 reveals pay rates did not fluctuate upon new appointments but were tied to the amount of labor required and subsequent salary set by the federal government.⁸

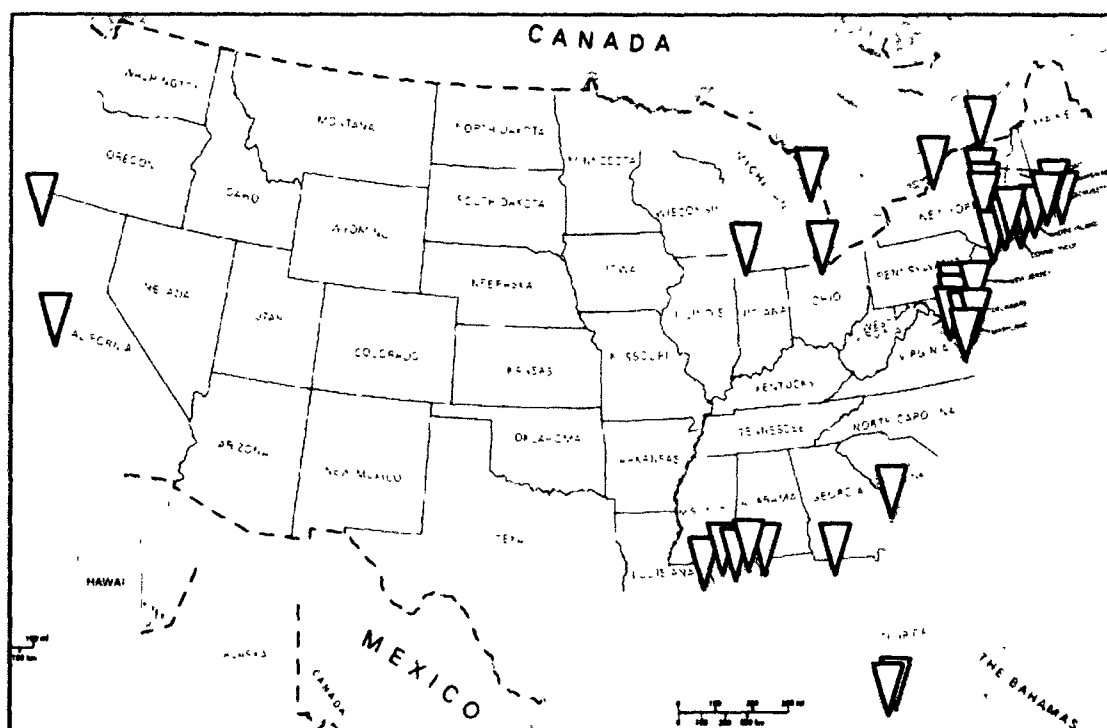
Because most female keepers were widows, they kept the light where their spouse died, and therefore, the practice of hiring women became national (figure 3). The greatest number of women keepers were centered on the eastern seaboard and areas with the largest concentrations of light stations such as Long Island Sound, Chesapeake Bay, and the Gulf coast. Yet, women keepers were also employed in the Florida Keys, the Great Lakes, and on the California coast, demonstrating that the hiring of women keepers was not a local custom but federal employment policy. The diverse locations of the lighthouses also means women served as keepers under various conditions. For example, Barbara Mabrity worked as principal keeper at Key West Lighthouse in Florida from 1832 to 1862. During these thirty years, she endured threat of attack by the Seminoles and "survived four hurricanes—in 1835, 1841, 1842, and 1846."⁹ In contrast, the women keeping lights in the Chesapeake Bay had greater access to supplies, better weather and

⁷ Neil E. Hurley, *Keepers of Florida Lighthouses, 1820-1939* (Alexandria, VA: Historic Lighthouse Publishers, 1990), 77-103.

⁸ *Official Register of the United States*, 13 vols (Washington, DC: Department of State, 1830-1859).

⁹ Clifford and Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights*, 29.

no threat of attack by Native Americans. Women keepers stationed at off shore and remote lighthouses suggest widows were hired based upon where their husbands were keepers.



Source: National Atlas of the United States, <http://www.nationalatlas.gov>.

Figure 3. Geographic Distribution of Female Lighthouse Keepers, 1820-1859

While the vast majority of the women hired as keepers were widows or other family members, the familial status of a few remains unknown. On the Hudson River in New York, a Mrs. Thomas Hudson tended a seasonal post light for twenty years at \$100 a year. The original entry in the 1853 *Official Register* lists “Thomas Hudson” as keeper, but two years later it was changed to “Mrs. Thomas Hudson.”¹⁰ It is unclear if her husband died and Mrs. Thomas gained his position, but since married women were not

¹⁰ *Official Register*, 1853, 1855.

hired as keepers, it is likely Mrs. Thomas was a widow. In 1855, the *Notice of Removal* for Mrs. Chas. M. O'Malley of Bois Blanc Light, Michigan confirms her previous employment but not status.¹¹ She may have been a political appointment, married to or widow of Upper Peninsula politician, Charles M. O'Malley.¹² It does not appear she was related to the previous keeper, Lyman Granger, who served from 1845 to 1854.¹³ In Vermont, at Windmill Point Light, Clarinda Mott served as keeper from 1859 to 1862, but was not related to her predecessor, George LaFarge. Her family may have had some local political clout, and it appears Clarinda was a grandmother, aged fifty-five, when appointed.¹⁴ The full history of these women remains unclear, but it appears they each might have had a political or local connection that helped them secure an appointment as head lighthouse keeper.

Although the histories of some female keepers is still unknown, the following biographical sketches of Rebecca Flaherty at Sand Key, Florida; Harriet Towner at Michigan City, Indiana; and Charlotte Layton at Point Pinos, California, serve as examples of experiences of early female lighthouse keepers. These three women represent different geographic areas (Southeast Coast, Great Lakes and Pacific Coast), time periods (1830s, 1840s and 1850s), lighthouse sizes (rotating eleven lamps with fifteen inch reflectors, fixed four lamps with fourteen inch reflectors and 3rd Order Fresnel Lens with one lamp), and salaries (\$600, \$350, and \$1,000). By piecing together these womens' lives, it is possible to study the confluence of events in the Early Republic

¹¹ NC-31 Series 96, Notices of Removal 1850-1855, RG 26, NARA.

¹² Stephan D. Bingham, *Early History of Michigan with Biographies of State Officers, Members of Congress, Judges and Legislators* (Lansing, MI: Thorp & Godfrey, 1888), 501.

¹³ U.S. Coast Guard, "Historic Light Stations," U.S. Government, <http://www.uscg.mil/history/web/lighthouses/LHMI.asp>

¹⁴ *Official Register*, 1857, 1859, 1861; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860 Federal Census, Alburgh, Grand Isle County, Vermont, 20 June 1860, 27.

that made the hiring of women as lighthouse keepers possible, and to show the women keepers' constant efforts to provide for their families.

REBECCA FLAHERTY

When Florida achieved statehood in 1845, about a dozen lighthouses had been established along its lengthy coast. The southern keys consisted of a long chain of islands extending west into the Gulf of Mexico and were especially hazardous for mariners. On one sparse island, known simply as Sand Key, a sixty-five foot tall brick tower with a revolving light at a focal plane of seventy feet had been established in 1827.¹⁵ The keepers for this light originally hailed from Maryland, but came to Sand Key from the Dry Tortugas, about sixty miles to the west.

During the battle in September 1814 that inspired Francis Scott Key to pen America's national anthem, John R. Flaherty was serving with the Washington Blues of the 5th Maryland Regiment to hold off the British army's advance on Baltimore.¹⁶ Almost exactly six years later, in nearby Frederick County, Flaherty married twenty-two-year-old Rebecca T. Winnull.¹⁷ In 1824, Rebecca T. Flaherty solicited from Stephen Pleasonton a lighthouse position for her husband, mentioning John's service to "his Country in the hour of danger and more particularly in the glorious defense of Baltimore," and explaining that due to rheumatism John was "incapable of providing for

¹⁵ Thomas Taylor, "Sand Key Florida's Two Lighthouses," *Keeper's Log* 19, no. 4 (2003): 3-4.

¹⁶ Nathaniel Hickman, ed., *The Citizen Soldiers at North Point and Port McHenry, September 12 & 13, 1814* (Baltimore, MD: Charles C. Saffrell, 1889), 29; Index to the Compiled Military Service Records for the Volunteer Soldiers Who Served During the War of 1812 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M602, roll 72), NARA.

¹⁷ F. Edward Wright, *Marriages and Deaths in the Newspapers of Frederick and Montgomery Counties 1820-1830* (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, 2007), 65. Married on 3 September 1820.

his family the necessities of life.”¹⁸ These two descriptions fit with the established pattern in early lighthouse appointments of soliciting a veteran (Revolutionary War or War of 1812) with some sort of malady that prevented the man from entering into another occupation.

In 1825, Rebecca Flaherty wrote to a Mrs. Adams (most likely Louisa Catherine Johnson Adams, then First Lady) a lengthy letter detailing the Flahertys’ many tribulations:

My husband has not had a days work for four weeks past, and it is impossible for him to get work in Baltimore...If he does not get work or some situation before winter, I do not know what will become of us...my three sisters that have no other protector but myself since we lost our parents which was a great misfortune to us for we lost both and an uncle in the course of two weeks...I have seen nothing but trouble since my husband was sick best part of the four years we lived in Washington we were strangers there and I could get no work sometimes we had not a mouthful to eat, and what money he earned when he was able to work he was defrauded out of the man that he worked for failed and was in our debt \$60 and we never got a cent of it...In that way by sickness and other misfortunes we have always been kept behind hand.¹⁹

The contrast between the letter Flaherty wrote to Pleasonton and the one she wrote to Adams is striking. Both seek assistance with Flaherty’s appointment as a lighthouse keeper, but while Rebecca Flaherty highlighted John Flaherty’s military experience to Pleasonton, she makes no mention of it in the letter to Adams. Furthermore, although both letters mention the family’s hardship, the letter to Adams contains much more detail and a “wifely” tone that is absent from the letter to Pleasonton. This is evident in how Rebecca describes the family’s

¹⁸ Rebecca Flaherty (hereafter Rebecca) to Pleasonton, 1824, quoted in Clifford and Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights*, 25.

¹⁹ Rebecca to Mrs. Adams, 9 August 1825, Box 3 D-Fo, A-1 Series 82 Correspondence Concerning Keepers and Assistants, RG 26, NARA; Rebecca’s lost family may have been William and Mary Winnall (parents) and Lewis Mahorney (uncle) who died within thirteen days in March 1817. F. Edward Wright, *Newspapers Abstracts of Frederick County Maryland, 1816-1819* (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, 2007), 105.

hardship to Adams in detail, highlighting concerns about the coming winter, protecting her sisters, the lack of food and poor business decisions. These are all concerns a wife would be able to commiserate with another wife about during the Early Republic. In contrast, Rebecca writes Pleasonton using basic facts that would appeal to a male reader such as John's military service and his inability to support his family. Rebecca thus carefully crafted her letters to achieve the greatest effect for her family.

Whether and how much these letters helped is unknown, but John Flaherty did receive an appointment to a lighthouse in the Dry Tortugas at the end of 1825.²⁰ The Flahertys made passage to Florida and John lit the light on the barren Garden Key in July 1826.²¹ The remote and harsh conditions in the Dry Tortugas Islands exacerbated John Flaherty's medical condition, described variously as "rheumatism" and "inflammation of the kidneys," and the family faced privation due to the lack of fresh water and access to supplies.²² After further requests by the Flahertys, they were moved to the new light at Sand Key in April 1827.²³

Sand Key was about seven miles southwest of Key West, and thus much closer to provisions and social events, but the small, sandy island still lacked fresh water, firewood, or arable land for a garden. As they had in the Dry Tortugas, the Flahertys suffered in the southern climate. In May 1828, Rebecca Flaherty wrote to Pleasonton that she had received a letter from Mr. Flaherty stating he was "very

²⁰ John Flaherty to Pleasonton, 31 December 1825, Box 2 E-H 1806-1853, NC-31 Series 17F Miscellaneous Letters Received Alphabetical 1801-1852, RG 26, NARA.

²¹ "Notice of New Lighthouse," *Baltimore Patriot*, 28 June 1826, Baltimore, MD, Nineteenth Century Newspapers via Old Dominion University Library, <http://www.lib.odu.edu>.

²² Rebecca to Pleasonton, 1824, quoted in Clifford and Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights*, 25; Rebecca to Pleasonton, 1 May 1828, Box 2 E-H 1806-1853, NC-31 Series 17F Miscellaneous Letters Received Alphabetical 1801-1852, RG 26, NARA.

²³ Taylor, "Sand Key," 4; Clifford and Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights*, 26.

unwell and at times scarcely able to get to the top of the lighthouse from...inflammation of the kidneys.”²⁴ The phrasing in the letter indicates Rebecca was “home,” most likely in Maryland and possibly Baltimore, as she apologizes for not being able to call on Pleasonton due to sickness. On her husband’s behalf, Rebecca requested a temporary leave so that he could receive medical treatment in Maryland. Rebecca also explained her own physical maladies: “I will never be able to go out again for the doctor says it will kill me if I do, I have never been well since my sickness at Tortugas, the climate does not agree with either of us.”²⁵ In the context of the letter, “go out” appears to refer to the Flahertys serving in Florida again. Rebecca frankly admits she thinks it would be best for their health for John to resign, though she acknowledges “we have nothing but misery before us when he does return.”²⁶ Rebecca’s letter invokes the desperation she wrote of four years earlier to Mrs. Adams and shows the constant hardships the family endured. Although a lighthouse keeper appointment must have alleviated some of the family’s financial concerns, the Flahertys still dealt with poor health and had to survive on a desolate island in the Florida Keys.

In 1830, John Flaherty passed away, and Rebecca succeeded him as keeper of Sand Key Light. From her earlier communications, it is reasonable to conclude that she either pursued or accepted the offer of keeper because she had

²⁴ Rebecca to Pleasonton, 1 May 1828, Box 2 E-H 1806-1853, NC-31 Series 17F Miscellaneous Letters Received Alphabetical 1801-1852, RG 26, NARA.

²⁵ Rebecca to Pleasonton, 1 May 1828, RG 26, NARA.

²⁶ Rebecca to Pleasonton, 1 May 1828, RG 26, NARA.

no other resources. Rebecca Flaherty thus did “go out” again to desolate Sand Key, but this time with the company of a sister to help ease the loneliness.²⁷

In late 1833 or early 1834, Rebecca Flaherty addressed her concerns about conditions at Sand Key directly to the new Secretary of the Treasury, Roger Taney. The two-page letter in elegant script describes Sand Key’s remote location, the dangerous weather and the scarce resources that caused her to have “literally been exposed to starvation.”²⁸ Rebecca implores Secretary Taney for a good boat to fetch supplies and for the cessation of “the hard regulation which compells [sic] me to pay for my fuel.”²⁹ Beginning in 1827, the government had supplied wood for heating and cooking, but the rule had recently changed. Rebecca rightly points out that other keepers “pay nothing for fuel” since they are located in areas where wood can be obtained freely whereas she was on a treeless island. This letter continues to show Rebecca’s struggle to provide for her family and her unending determination to ask superiors for support. It is unknown if Rebecca’s requests were granted, and within two years she remarried and returned to Baltimore.

On 20 November 1834, Rebecca married Frederick Neill, a ship captain, at Sand Key Lighthouse.³⁰ Frederick was appointed the new keeper, as seems was customary when the female keeper remarried, but resigned on 10 February 1836.³¹ By 1840, the new family was living in Baltimore, and continued to live

²⁷ Taylor, “Sand Key,” 5; Clifford and Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights*, 27.

²⁸ Rebecca to Roger Taney (Secretary of the Treasury), circa Sep 1833-Jun 1834, Box 2 E-H 1806-1853, NC-31 Series 17F Miscellaneous Letters Received Alphabetical 1801-1852, RG 26, NARA.

²⁹ Rebecca to Roger Taney, circa Sep 1833-Jun 1834, RG 26, NARA.

³⁰ Jordan R. Dodd, *Florida Marriages, 1822-1850* (Provo, UT: The Generations Network, Inc., 1999); Taylor, “Sand Key,” 5; Clifford and Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights*, 28.

³¹ *Official Register*, 1835, 68; Taylor, “Sand Key,” 5.

there according to both the 1850 and 1860 census. Frederick Neill was not listed with the family in 1860, but since he was still earning a living as a ship captain, he was likely at sea. Rebecca disappears after the 1860 census, and it is possible she passed away in Baltimore between 1860 and 1870.³²

Various secondary sources paint the Flahertys, and Rebecca in particular, as chronic complainers. However, primary sources, especially the detailed letter to Mrs. Adams, reveal a very different story. The Flahertys experienced a series of unfortunate events that they struggled to overcome. The Flaherty family's tribulations, moreover, are an example of the difficulties many Americans experienced during the rise of the market economy in the Early Republic. Rebecca Flaherty's "begging letter" to Mrs. Adams echoes scores of similar letters written to prominent officials and businessmen in hopes of securing some means of support.³³

HARRIET TOWNER

When it comes to lighthouse history, the Great Lakes are often overlooked by those more interested in the salty adventures of the deep blue sea. Residents along the shores of the inland seas, however, know the lake waters can be just as turbulent. The relatively shallow depth and contained shores allow waves to build higher and faster than in the open ocean. Indeed, some of the most sensational shipwrecks in America occurred

³² "Frederick Neal," U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1840 Federal Census, Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Maryland, 1840, 67; "Frederic Niell," U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850 Federal Census, Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Maryland, 24 July 1850, 438; "Rebecca T. Neall," U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860 Federal Census, Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Maryland, 22 June 1860, 116; "Frederick Neill, *Rainbow*, 7 Mar 1849," Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at Baltimore, 1820-1891 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M255, roll 7), NARA.

³³ Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 235-240. "The curious practice of epistolary begging began in England in about 1815."

in the Great Lakes, including the modern vessels *SS Carl D. Bradley* in 1958 and *SS Edmund Fitzgerald* in 1975.³⁴ If large iron vessels with steam power, radio communications and advanced weather forecasting can still wreck in the Great Lakes, it is not hard to imagine how dangerous the same waters were for smaller wooden sailing ships in the nineteenth century.³⁵

Because water transportation was vital for moving resources and people to and from the inland region, lighthouses were established in the Great Lakes region to facilitate safe navigation. In the summer of 1837, one such lighthouse was built at Michigan City, Indiana. In 1841, the second keeper assigned to the light would be Reverend James Towner from Vermont, who had moved to the Great Lakes area in 1835.

James Towner and Harriet Coit were raised along the shores of Lake Champlain near Burlington, Vermont. In 1823, at twenty-six, James graduated from the University of Vermont and spent a year studying divinity at Andover Theological Seminary near Boston. At the same time, Harriet and her sister, Emily, spent a few years teaching in Burlington. James and Harriet crossed paths at some point, most likely while both were in Burlington, and married in September 1827 when James was thirty and Harriet twenty-nine. Their first child, Mary, was born in April 1829 in Vermont. From 1830 to 1835, the new family lived in Groton, Massachusetts, where James was the principal of an academy. During this period, their first son, Daniel, was born in the winter of 1831. In 1835, the family of four headed west with Abigail Coit, another of Harriet's sisters.³⁶

³⁴ The U.S. Coast Guard's Marine Board of Investigation Marine Casualty Reports website includes both of these vessels, as well as many others ranging from 1947-2001. U.S. Coast Guard, "Marine Casualty Reports," U.S. Government, <http://homeport.uscg.mil/>.

³⁵ The Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum estimates "more than 6,000 ships and 30,000 lives lost on the Great Lakes since the foundering of LaSalle's *Griffin* in 1679." <http://www.shipwreckmuseum.com/>.

³⁶ James William Towner, *A Genealogy of the Towner Family: the Descendants of Richard Towner, who Came from Sussex County, Eng., to Guilford, Conn., Before 1685* (Los Angeles, CA: Times-

The Towners most likely made passage via water, taking the recently completed Champlain and Erie Canals to Buffalo, New York on Lake Erie, then continuing by water around Michigan to Chicago. They made their way thirty miles inland to DuPage, Will County, Illinois, where their second son, William, was born in April 1837.³⁷ James may have been called west by divine providence to preach in the new frontier, or perhaps by some other opportunity. Soon after they migrated to Michigan City, Indiana, where James was the principal of the Michigan City Institute from 1838 to 1840. The year 1841 was very tumultuous for the Towner family. The youngest son, William, died in February, just shy of his fourth birthday. James was briefly the minister of the First Congregational Church until appointed the light keeper of Michigan City Lighthouse on 25 October 1841 with an annual salary of \$350.³⁸

Shipping in the Great Lakes during the nineteenth century operated about seven months a year, when the harbors and rivers were free of ice, which was commonly referred to as the navigation season. Between about November and March, vessels hove-to in harbors, or were taken out of the water for repairs. It appears lights were extinguished during the winter at places that were iced-in as they were not needed to guide vessels. Because the lighthouse at Michigan City was one of these, the Towner

Mirror Printing & Binding House, 1910), 97; University of Vermont, *General Catalogue of the University of Vermont and State Agricultural College, Burlington, Vermont, 1791-1900* (Burlington, VT: Free Press Association, 1901), 48; Benjamin Franklin Parker, *History of Wolfeborough* (Cambridge, MA: Caustic & Claflin, 1901), 375; *Proceedings and Papers of the Vermont Antiquarian Society* (Burlington, VT: Vermont Antiquarian Society, 1900), 47-48; M. Emily Eastman, *History and Genealogy of Deacon Joseph Eastman of Hadley, Mass.* (Westfield, MA: M.E. Eastman, 1908), 71-72.

³⁷ James' remarried mother, Zipporah Williams, would buy eighty-six acres there in 1845, and pass away in 1855, Towner, *A Genealogy*, 59-60; Certificate 15218, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, Federal Land Patents, <http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/>; William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier 1783-1850: Vol. III The Congregationalists* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1964), 134.

³⁸ Jasper Packard, *History of La Porte County, Indiana* (La Porte, IN: S.E. Taylor & Co., 1876), 88, 434; Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1373, roll 4 Great Lakes), NARA; Cemetery and Research Association of La Porte County, "Old Buryal Ground," La Porte County Indiana GenWeb, <http://www.dunelady.com/laporte/cemeteries>.

family would have had a winter to get used to the station before relighting for the 1842 navigation season. The light itself consisted of four oil lamps and fourteen-inch reflectors of Winslow Lewis design housed in a white forty-foot brick tower. A few feet away stood the keeper's one-and-a-half story white brick house, with a separate summer kitchen.³⁹ Located at the south end of Lake Michigan, the light had four lamps so it could be bright enough to guide vessels looking to enter Michigan City but not so bright as to confuse mariners seeking other harbors such as Chicago.

The Towner family kept the light, apparently peacefully, over the next two navigation seasons of 1842 and 1843. Then on 2 March 1844, James died of unknown causes, leaving Harriet a widow at forty-six with Mary and Daniel, aged fifteen and thirteen. Harriet needed to keep a home for her family and apparently solicited the keeper position, to which she was appointed on 21 March 1844.⁴⁰ Harriet would hold the position for the next nine years before being removed in May 1853.⁴¹

Few documents survive from female lighthouse keepers during the Early Republic, and most that do are official letters to government bureaucrats. The Indiana Historical Society, however, holds two rare letters from Harriet Towner to her son, Daniel Coit Towner, while he was attending Amherst College in Massachusetts.⁴² These

³⁹ Clifford and Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights*, 103; *Official Register* 1845, 209; U.S. Lighthouse Establishment, *List of Light-Houses, Beacons and Floating Lights of the United States* (Washington, DC: Gideon & Co., 1849).

⁴⁰ Wilson, *Life After Death*, 172. Wilson claimed many older widows did not remarry making it necessary for them to find ways to support themselves. Wilson's analysis is based upon a study by Susan Klepp for widows in Philadelphia between 1750 and 1830. Half of married women were widows, with an average age of forty-eight, and eighty-three percent did not remarry. This data is based on urban widows and difficult to extrapolate to rural or frontier women.

⁴¹ Packard, *History of La Porte County*, 434; *Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912* (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1373, roll 4 Great Lakes), NARA.

⁴² Harriet Towner Letters, SC1966, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana. In the letters, Harriet refers to her son by his middle name, Coit.

letters from 1848 and 1850 give some insight into Harriet's daily struggles as a female lighthouse keeper in the Early Republic.

The first letter dated 28 October 1848 begins forlornly with, "My dear Son, It is Saturday evening and...I am alone."⁴³ Loneliness is a recurring theme in the letters, although Abigail Coit still lived with Harriet and helped with the upkeep of the light.⁴⁴ Harriet then brings Daniel up to date on the letters that have crossed her desk and the happenings of his sister, Mary, who at that time was visiting Chicago. The letter from 1850 also speaks about the comings and goings of neighbors and family, including those setting out for California. In both letters Harriet entreats Daniel to write more often writing, "I do hope I shall receive a letter from you to day, it seems very long since the last one came," and "if it is because you are so much engaged in your college duties, that you have no time write, I excuse you, but if from any other cause, I can't excuse you!"⁴⁵ In 1848, Daniel's letters took eleven days to reach Harriet, who eagerly awaited them: "This morning my dear dear son, your welcome letter mailed Oct 23d reached me...I smiled, and as I proceeded reading y'r answers to my inquires, I tho't how foolish I was to trouble you with such questions, but you know how mothers will think of everything."⁴⁶ It is clear Harriet truly loved her children and gained much fulfillment from their letters. Harriet's letters also demonstrate the isolation that many lighthouse keepers felt, and the importance of letters in alleviating this loneliness.

⁴³ Harriet Towner (hereafter Harriet) to Daniel Towner (hereafter Daniel), 28 October 1848, Indiana Historical Society (hereafter IHS). This letter is eight pages and spans 28 October to 6 November 1848.

⁴⁴ Harriet to Daniel, 28 October 1848, IHS. "Oh, I am so lonely without Mary—Aunt had a sick turn yesterday, is now finishing painting in the Lt. H. and I am the only one in the house."

⁴⁵ Harriet to Daniel, 3 April 1850, IHS. This letter is two pages and spans 3 to 4 April 1850.

⁴⁶ Harriet to Daniel, 28 October 1848, IHS. This passage was written later in the long letter under the date of November 3rd.

Harriet's letters to her son were peppered with motherly affection and instruction: "You must keep in mind, my dear child, that your are now forming y'r character for life...I pray that you may be consistent, and exemplary and in all things, honor the religion you profess." His father had mostly schooled Daniel, and Harriet feared James' death had set her son back in his studies. She expressed these fears to her son, but bolstered him by saying, "I am perfectly satisfied with y'r past improvement, and never for a moment, have had cause to regret the means that have been expended in y'r behalf." Harriet implores him to "get some kind of overcoat...and thick boots," and to not "spend much on Societies—be economical of your coffers, it is the continual dropping that wears the stone."⁴⁷ Concern over money was another issue that Harriet often discussed in both letters. The growing importance of money in the market economy meant many Americans, including female lighthouse keepers, became even more dependent on a cash income and thus fretted more over the management of money.

Although the annual salary for the keeping of a light the size used at Michigan City was \$350, it appears this amount was prorated due to the shorter navigation season. Harriet indicated the start of the 1850 navigation season to her son thus: "Have begun to Light up, commenced 29th March, nearly 4 months cessation."⁴⁸ She also described her pay situation to Daniel, bemoaning that "My last salary money is all gone except a few cents, and have taken up 22\$ on what remained of the 200, when you left."⁴⁹ This would appear to indicate that her actual salary was \$200, which would be proportional for seven months of work at an annual rate of \$350. Using estimated inflation adjustment, \$200 in

⁴⁷ Harriet to Daniel, 28 October 1848, IHS.

⁴⁸ Harriet to Daniel, 3 April 1850, IHS.

⁴⁹ Harriet to Daniel, 28 October 1848, IHS.

1845 would equal \$5,575 in 2010, well below the poverty line of \$22,050.⁵⁰ Although the Towner family lived rent-free at the lighthouse, they were responsible for obtaining by cash, barter or foraging all food, sundries, wood for heating and cooking, medical care and educational expenses. Harriet described her financial situation and attempt to balance the books:

I want very much to sent 20 or 30\$ in this, but there is only about \$10 remaining of the 200...I would go to Mr. Miller & get the sum of 20\$, but it is Saturday afternoon...I ought to have \$50.00 of Mr. Goodhue of Plainfield...also some of y'r uncle F— & 100 of Cole. I don't know what I will do...I shall call on my creditors here, & see if they will wait till I can more conveniently pay them—they must wait, don't like to be in debt, have been greatly perplexed for some time, but trust to pay all up in January if not before.⁵¹

Thus, Harriet had to work diligently to save money, extend supplies, and use connections with family and friends to make ends meet.

Harriet also often spoke about scraping together money to send to Daniel for his college expenses. Referring to a remaining \$300 in college savings, Harriet explained to Daniel “if we exhaust that amount, you will be greatly troubled next year to meet your graduating expenses, as there is no other dependence.”⁵² Enclosing \$30 with the 1848 letter, she grimly wrote at the end, “don't know as I can send anymore this term.”⁵³ As Harriet struggled to balance her household books, it is no surprise that her extant letters

⁵⁰ As the Federal Reserve was not founded until 1913, the amounts calculated before then are estimates. Inflation rate of \$1 in 1845 equaling \$27.87 in 2010 was used based upon rate of \$1 in 1845 equaling \$23 in 2002 in Scott Derks and Tony Smith, *The Value of a Dollar: Colonial Era to the Civil War, 1600-1865* (Millerton, NY: Grey House Publishing, 2005), 305; and then computing the value of \$23 in 2002 to \$27.87 in 2010 using the U.S. Department of Labor's online inflation calculator: Bureau of Labor Statistics, “CPI Inflation Calculator,” U.S. Government, http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm Harriet Towner's household supported four individuals (including herself). The U.S Department of Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines for 2010 for a family of four are \$22,050. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, “August 2010 HHS Poverty Guidelines,” United States Government, <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/10poverty.shtml>.

⁵¹ Harriet to Daniel, 28 October 1848, IHS.

⁵² Harriet to Daniel, 3 April 1850, IHS.

⁵³ Harriet to Daniel, 28 October 1848, IHS.

were full of information about frugality, the necessity for supplies, and anxiety over paying for Daniel's education.

Harriet must have been very proud when Daniel graduated from Amherst College in 1851. Her letters demonstrate how much mental and pecuniary effort she expended on his education. Daniel studied law in Chicago, before dying from consumption in Michigan City on 11 August 1855.⁵⁴ The loss must have been overwhelming for Harriet, who had written him in 1848 that he was "a rich treasure, for which I am truly thankful."⁵⁵ As evidenced in her letters, Harriet poured so much hope and affection into Daniel, only to lose him fourteen years after the death of her youngest son, William. Now only her sister, Abigail Coit, and her eldest child, Mary (herself a recent widow), remained. In May 1853, Harriet was removed as keeper of Michigan City Lighthouse for unknown reasons, but the family appears to have remained in Michigan City for most of the 1850s. After Mary remarried in 1859 to Joseph Larimore of Niles, Michigan, Harriet and Abigail moved the almost forty miles northeast to be their neighbors. Harriet passed in early 1881 and was interred in Silverbrook Cemetery in Niles on 18 February.⁵⁶

Harriet's letters give insight into the life of a widow serving as lighthouse keeper in the Early Republic. The fear and joy for her children, the constant anxiety over expenses, the hope for a better future: these are struggles experienced by other female lighthouse keepers. On the one hand, Harriet's letters give substance to the romantic image of a stalwart "true woman" tending the home fires and raising civic-minded

⁵⁴ William Lewis Montague, *Biographical Record of the Alumni of Amherst College During its First Half Century, 1821-1871* (Amherst, MA: Amherst College, 1883), 253-254.

⁵⁵ Harriet to Daniel, 28 October 1848, IHS.

⁵⁶ Eastman, *History and Genealogy*, 134; Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1373, roll 4 Great Lakes), NARA; "Harriet C. Towner," U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860 Federal Census, City of Niles, Berrien County, Michigan, 4 June 1860, 17; Silverbrook Cemetery, "Grave Search: Harriet Towner," Friends of Silverbrook Cemetery, <http://www.friendsofsilverbrook.org>.

children. On the other, her existence was lonely and fraught with concern over her children's advancement and scratching together enough to survive.

CHARLOTTE LAYTON

The opening of the American West after the Mexican War and the California Gold Rush created a flood of settlers to the Pacific Coast. The increase in shipping, as well as the government's desire to regulate the new territories, prompted Congress to build lighthouses along the Pacific Coast. The first lighthouses were built in California, with eight in operation by 1855.⁵⁷ One such light was situated on a point of land covered with pine trees, aptly called Point Pinos, that jutted out into the Pacific Ocean one hundred and fifteen miles south of San Francisco. Located a good four miles outside of Monterey, California, the Point Pinos Lighthouse used the a new third order Fresnel lens and never had the laborious array of ill-made Winslow Lewis lamps and reflectors. Like many Californian residents, the first family to live at the lighthouse traveled thousands of miles before reaching the Pacific Coast.

Charles Layton was born in Oxfordshire, England about 1814, but made his way to America, enlisting in the United States Army in Philadelphia, Philadelphia on 19 August 1837. As a private in the 3rd Artillery Company F, he served in Florida, where he reenlisted at Fort Pierce on 16 August 1840. In July 1842, the company moved to Fort Macon near Atlantic Beach, North Carolina. During his time stationed on the Outer Banks, Charles met and subsequently married Charlotte Ann Wade on 29 November 1843. Charlotte, a native of nearby Beaufort, was born in March 1824. Their first son,

⁵⁷ *Official Register*, 1855, 34-35: Alcatraz, Fort Point, Point Pinos, Farrallones, Humbolt, San Diego, Point Conception, and Point Bonita (all as spelled in report).

Charles, was born in North Carolina in 1844. In November of that year, Company F transferred to Fort McHenry, Maryland where Charles reenlisted on 16 June 1845. The following year, the company briefly went to Fort Columbus, New York before sailing for California aboard USS *Lexington* on 14 July 1846. The vessel stopped in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil and Valparaiso, Chile, before arriving in Monterey, California on 27 January 1847.⁵⁸ William T. Sherman, a new junior First Lieutenant with Company F, who also made the voyage, described the ports of call and the “very rough weather” that delayed for a month passage around Cape Horn.⁵⁹

It is unclear whether Charlotte moved with Charles along the east coast before relocating to California, though most forts did have housing for married enlisted men, and it was customary for wives to follow their husbands. Either way, Charlotte and her son did follow Charles to California, although not on the same vessel. The six month long voyage around Cape Horn must have had its share of vivid experiences for the twenty-three year old mother and her three-year-old boy. Most likely Charlotte was traveling with other spouses when she arrived in Monterey on the supply ship *Erie* in 1847.⁶⁰ The Laytons first lived in Fort Halleck (located within the Monterey Presidio), which likely was where their second son, William, was born in 1849. On 16 June 1850, Charles was discharged at Monterey as an Ordnance Sergeant. The young family settled

⁵⁸ Returns from Regular Army Artillery Regiments June 1821-January 1901 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M727, roll #9 Third Regiment Jan. 1841-Dec. 1850), NARA; Charles Layton to Charlotte Ann Wade, 29 November 1843, Marriage Records, Carteret County Courthouse, Beaufort, North Carolina; “Chas Layton,” U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850 Federal Census, Monterey, Monterey County, California, 25 September 1850, 227.

⁵⁹ *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1875), 1:11-18.

⁶⁰ Charlotte’s obituary cites her arriving on *Erie* in January 1847, while Sherman’s memoirs mention a ship called *Erie* arriving in March. Sherman’s memoirs do not mention traveling with *Erie* or wives/families. Charlotte Layton Harris Obituary, *Monterey Cypress*, 15 February 1896, Monterey, California, California History Room & Archives, Monterey Public Library, Monterey, California (hereafter Monterey Public Library); *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 25.

in Monterey, where they owned three small pieces of property. The family grew again with the birth of Thomas in 1851, and Caroline in August 1855.⁶¹

Charles was appointed the first keeper of the new Point Pinos Light on 6 September 1854 at an annual rate of \$700. His salary was increased on 7 November 1854 to \$1000, indicating the need to retain quality keepers and the high cost of supplies.⁶² The Laytons moved into the one story grey granite Cape Cod style house with a black lantern room thrusting out of the center of the roof and an accompanying spiral staircase that bifurcated the residence. First exhibited on 1 February 1855, the Point Pinos Light displayed a fixed white light visible for almost thirteen nautical miles.⁶³

An assistant keeper was allowed for the station and Isaac Hitchcock was appointed 29 January 1855 for \$650 per year. Hitchcock had also served in Company F 3rd Artillery of the U.S. Army, transiting around Cape Horn with Charles in 1846, and was discharged in Monterey in 1851.⁶⁴ Charles had most likely requested Hitchcock as an assistant, having known him while serving in the military. It was certainly common for wives to be assistants, yet, in this case either Charles or Charlotte did not want that to occur. It may have had much to do with Charlotte's hectic days spent corralling three young children. The fourth child and only daughter, Caroline, would be born in August, suggesting Charlotte may have realized she was once again pregnant.

⁶¹ Register of Enlistments in the U.S. Army, 1798-1914 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M233, 1840 Jun-1846), NARA; Returns from Regular Army Artillery Regiments June 1821-January 1901 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M727, roll #9 Third Regiment Jan. 1841-Dec. 1850), NARA; "Geo W. Harris," U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860 Federal Census, Monterey Township, Monterey County, California, 14 June 1860, 33; Entries under Charles Layton, City of Monterey Assessor's Book 1851-1855, Monterey Public Library.

⁶² Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1373, roll 6 West Coast, Alaska & Hawaii), NARA. Pay was from date light was displayed.

⁶³ Notice of New Lighthouse, *Sailor's Magazine and Naval Journal*, April 1855, New York, Nineteenth Century Newspapers via Old Dominion University Library, <http://www.lib.odu.edu>.

⁶⁴ Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1373, roll 6 West Coast, Alaska & Hawaii), NARA; Register of Enlistments in the U.S. Army, 1798-1914 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M233, 1846 Jul-1850 Oct), NARA.

The first year the light was lit a dispute, commonly referred to as the Roach-Belcher Feud, erupted. Although the focus of the feud had nothing to do with the Layton family, it would cost Charles his life. The basis of the dispute was the misappropriation of the wealthy Jose Maria Sanchez estate by former sheriff William Roach, who was originally suggested for the guardianship of the Sanchez estate by Lewis Belcher, a prominent local businessman. In Monterey, tensions erupted into violence as Belcher was shot at but not harmed. In March 1855, Roach's brother-in-law killed Dr. Sanford (the widow Sanchez's third husband) before himself dying in the gunfight. Roach hired attorney Isaac Wall, who was also the new Collector of Customs for Monterey and thus Charles Layton's supervisor. On 10 November 1855, Wall was ambushed while on horseback en route to San Luis Obispo by an outlaw named Anastacio Garcia. The subsequent small posse organized to chase Garcia included Wall's brother James, and Charles Layton.⁶⁵ Perhaps Charles was chosen because of his military experience, but most likely he volunteered due to the murder of his boss and the man who may have helped Layton and Hitchcock secure their appointments.⁶⁶

Early in the morning of 16 November 1855, the posse surrounded the Garcia house twelve miles from Monterey. In the ensuing gunfight, Charles was wounded in the stomach and hand. Separated from the rest in the confusion, Layton walked six miles towards Monterey before being discovered and brought to town. Although originally thought to have survivable wounds, Charles died three days later on 19 November

⁶⁵ William B. Seacrest, *California Feuds: Vengeance, Vendettas & Violence on the Old West Coast* (Sanger, CA: Quill Driver Books, 2005), 1-24. See also Paul P. Parker, "The Roach-Belcher Feud," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, 29 No. 1 (March 1950), 19-28;

⁶⁶ Jerry McCaffery, *Lighthouse, Point Pinos, Pacific Grove, California*, (Pacific Grove, CA, 2001), 48-49. McCaffery specifies further connection including hiring of Layton as a temporary customs agent, and allowing the Laytons to live in the lighthouse before completion.

1855.⁶⁷ A veteran of thirteen years service in the U.S. Army died from wounds received in an ill-fated shoot-out of cursory importance in the Roach-Belcher feud.

Charlotte would undoubtedly have been able to see her husband before his death. It appears there was some hope he would recover, but ultimately the wounds became infected. No accounts have been found detailing Charles' final passing or his burial.⁶⁸ At thirty-one, Charlotte was a widow with four young children, and her closest family was three thousand miles away. The youngest child, Caroline, was only about three months old and would require the infant care of breast-feeding and constant diaper changes. The Laytons still owned a lot and house on Larkin Street in Monterey, but without a steady source of income Charlotte was facing the destitution that affected many widows during the Early Republic.⁶⁹ Taking the position left vacant by her husband's death, Charlotte received a dependable income and a home. As Charlotte did not previously fill the assistant job, it could be surmised she now sought the head keeper position in order to survive. On 4 January 1856, the Lighthouse Establishment appointed Charlotte as the keeper of Point Pinos Lighthouse, though she had been serving in this capacity since Charles' death.⁷⁰ Her pay commenced at \$1,000 per year, further confirming widows earned the same salary as their deceased husbands. With advancements in infrastructure and more local supplies, the pay was reduced to \$800

⁶⁷ 17 & 24 Nov 1855, *Monterey Sentinel*, Monterey Public Library; John Boessenecker, *Gold Dust and Gunsmoke: Tales of Gold Rush Outlaws, Gunfighters, Lawmen and Vigilantes* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999), 191-193.

⁶⁸ McCaffery, *Lighthouse*, 50.

⁶⁹ Entries under Charles Layton, City of Monterey Assessor's Book 1851-1855, Monterey Public Library.

⁷⁰ Appointment of Charlotte Layton, Item No. 38.2-833-1, Point Pinos Lighthouse Collection, Pacific Grove Museum Archives, Pacific Grove, California. "Treasury Department, January 4, 1856, Madam, You are appointed Keeper of the Lighthouse at Point Pinos Cal, the duties of which office you will perform until further notice, at a salary of one thousand dollars per annum vice Charles Layton deceased. James Guthrie, Secretary of the Treasury."

around 1858.⁷¹ Isaac Hitchcock stayed on as the assistant, initially earning \$650, having his pay adjusted to \$500. In 1859, Isaac resigned and Anson Smith was assigned as the new assistant at \$500 per annum.⁷² These figures not only support the equality of pay between males and females, but are an example of a female head keeper with a lower-paid male assistant.

Removed from the hustle and bustle of the growing city, for four years Charlotte continued to keep the light with her assistant, while raising Charles, William, Thomas and Caroline. During this period, Anastacio Garcia was indicted for murder, and jailed in Monterey in February 1857. Ongoing tensions from the Roach-Belcher Feud combined with fears of Garcia's testimony caused unknown parties to hang Garcia in his cell under cover of night.⁷³ Was Charlotte relieved to have Garcia dead, and the drama of her husband's death over? Did she enjoy living in a semi-remote location, attending to the daily chores of mother and lighthouse keeper? Having been raised on the Atlantic Coast, Charlotte might have found some comfort gazing out at the blue grey waters of the Pacific. By saving money, Charlotte may have been able to finance a return to North Carolina to be near family, which would have eased her childrearing responsibilities and most likely also her spirit. In 1856, however, this would have meant sailing back around Cape Horn or travelling by wagon across the Great Plains, as the Trans-Continental Railroad would not be completed until 1869. Having survived the six-month sea voyage with three-year-old Charles in 1847, perhaps Charlotte did not desire to relive that experience with children now aged twelve, eight, six and a new born. Crossing dusty,

⁷¹ 1857 *Official Register* lists rate at \$1,000, then 1859 *Official Register* lists \$800.

⁷² Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1373, roll 6 West Coast, Alaska & Hawaii), NARA.

⁷³ Seacrest, *California Feuds*, 21-22.

dangerous plains must also have appeared daunting. Or perhaps Charlotte had wholeheartedly adopted California as her new home and thus endeavored to carry on with her life in her husband's occupation with no thoughts of returning east. Without journals or surviving family stories, only guesses can be made about Charlotte's motivations to remain in Monterey.

After four years, Charlotte met and married George Chase Harris. A native of Massachusetts, Harris had arrived in Monterey in 1846 as the third mate aboard a whaling ship. Like many transplants, Harris tried a variety of occupations from ranching to mining before settling on the livelihood of a tavern and saloon keeper. The "quiet, unassuming gentleman" might have known the Laytons before Charles' death, or perhaps Charlotte befriended him as a widow.⁷⁴ The two married in 1860, and George was appointed the new keeper on 4 August.⁷⁵ As in the case of Susan Harvey, it would appear that here too, Charlotte was replaced by her new husband due to social conventions rather than any lapse in her lighthouse duties. Several secondary sources report that George was an assistant keeper, yet he is not listed as such in the official documents examined. Furthermore, the 1860 census lists George as a tavern keeper while Charlotte is the Lighthouse Keeper and Anson Smith is the Assistant Lighthouse Keeper.⁷⁶ This would appear to suggest that the newly married couple were at the lighthouse, but George's primary association was as husband and not lighthouse keeper.

⁷⁴ George Chase Harris Obituary, *Monterey Cypress*, 17 December 1896, Monterey Public Library; Dennis Copeland (Historian and Archivist; Manager of Museums, Cultural Arts, and Archives for City of Monterey, California), e-mail message to author, 13 July 2010.

⁷⁵ Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1373, roll 6 West Coast, Alaska & Hawaii), NARA.

⁷⁶ "Geo W. Harris," U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1860 Federal Census, Monterey Township, Monterey County, California, 14 June 1860, 33; "George C. Harris," U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1870 Federal Census, Monterey, Monterey County, California, 6 September 1870, 25.

George was removed as keeper on 28 August 1861 and replaced by Frank Porter.⁷⁷

George's removal was most likely due to the poor keeping of the light as the Lighthouse Board strived to reduce the effect of politics on appointments and removals. Perhaps George was still more a tavern keeper than a light keeper.

After his removal as keeper of Point Pinos Light, the Harris family continued to live in Monterey with George operating various taverns and saloons, including the Washington Hotel where Dr. Sanford was killed during the Roach-Belcher feud. For a few years between 1875 and 1885 George and Charlotte lived in San Francisco next door to Caroline (Layton) Burr and her growing family.⁷⁸ They eventually returned to Monterey, where George passed away on 14 December 1890.⁷⁹ Charlotte, widowed again, lived another six years until dying on 11 February 1896 from a brain hemorrhage at the age of seventy-two.

Charlotte Layton lived a remarkable life that included marrying a foreign-born artilleryman, transiting on a sailing ship around Cape Horn, being an early settler in frontier California, enduring the murder of her husband, keeping a semi-remote lighthouse, raising four children, and outliving a second husband. The end of her obituary refers to Charlotte's local popularity and longevity: "The funeral...was largely attended, as the deceased had a host of warm friends, many of whom had known her since her first arrival in Monterey. Thus one by one, the old pioneers of California go to make room for a new generation."⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1373, roll 6 West Coast, Alaska & Hawaii), NARA.

⁷⁸ "Geo C. Harris," U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1880 Federal Census, San Francisco, San Francisco County, California, 2 June 1880, 1.

⁷⁹ George Harris Obituary, *Monterey Cypress*, 17 December 1890, Monterey Public Library.

⁸⁰ Charlotte Layton Harris Obituary, *Monterey Cypress*, 15 February 1896, Monterey Public Library.

Charlotte's migration is a good example of the increased mobility of the growing nation that now stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Her experiences of loss and survival in Gold Rush California could be true for many other pioneer women struggling to endure in the western frontier. Here again, as in many instances during the Early Republic, the position of lighthouse keeper was used both by a widow and the government to help a fatherless family survive. Thus, although Charlotte Layton served after the formation in 1852 of the Lighthouse Board that prohibited the regular hiring of women, it appears social constructs, necessity, and local support still encouraged the employment of females as lighthouse keepers.

The detailed analysis of the lives of Rebecca Flaherty, Harriet Towner and Charlotte Layton demonstrates the following key points: women were keepers in various areas and lights; the position of keeper was seen locally as a way to support a deceased keeper's family; the women experienced hardships and loss; and finally, each woman viewed the position as a means to support her family. The letters written by and for the female keepers continue to show the important role played by the women themselves and by the local community in helping the widows obtain the traditionally masculine keeper position.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

During the Early Republic in America, there were women who served as principal lighthouse keepers in their own right. They were paid a full wage, and performed a laborious and sometimes dangerous job. Most were the widows or other family members of a male keeper who had died in government employ. Most did not appear to have grandiose women's rights ideals that prompted them to be keepers. They kept the lights because it was necessary to support their families. For its part, the federal government hired them because the women knew how to tend the lights, they were present, and as widows had a legitimate claim on public assistance. Thus, the typical woman lighthouse keeper during the Early Republic was a widow of the previous keeper, often with young children, who performed lighthouse duties that were very similar to her traditional housework to earn a federal salary that was equal to other male keepers.

It is important, however, to retain perspective of the scope of this practice. From 1820 to 1859, women averaged five percent of all keepers, representing a small, but important part of the Lighthouse Establishment. The women keepers were thus neither a common occurrence nor a complete oddity. The number of keepers, along with Pleasonton's hiring statement about the appointment of widows, demonstrates that widows were appointed when convenient to a government that needed competent keepers and that acquiesced to their employment as a form of welfare. It was, obviously, also convenient for the women, who needed to support their families in the economic and political chaos of the Early Republic.

The relatively small number of female keepers also meant they were largely invisible to society and to the Lighthouse Establishment. When Congress set the salaries for lighthouse keepers, separate pay was not created for women because they were so few in number and because establishing a separate wage for women would indicate an official hiring practice. The effect, ironically, was that women keepers enjoyed equal pay with male keepers, though it also meant women remained unknown at a national level. The women keepers, however, were not locked away in their lighthouses and were known within their local communities as evidenced by the many letters and petitions found in the National Archives written by neighbors in support of widows for appointment or retention.

The general invisibility on the national level of women keepers has more to do with the government and society not wanting to know they were there, instead of actually not knowing women keepers were filling five percent of the positions. This denial stemmed from a post-revolutionary and industrializing society that relied upon prescribed gender roles as a bulwark against the many rapid changes of the Early Republic. The history of the women lighthouse keepers thus supports the argument that separate spheres ideology was not a description of the way real men and women lived during this era.

Yet, these cultural constructs did affect the employment opportunities for women so that positions most readily available outside the home reflected the traditional roles prescribed for white middle-to-upper-class women. The close association of lighthouse keeping tasks of tending lamps and cleaning, to the conventional housework of women, thus made lighthouse keeper an acceptable occupation for a few women. Since housework was being devalued in the rising market economy of antebellum America, as

argued by Jeanne Boydston, the subsequent association of lighthouse work with woman's work also meant the diminished view of the lighthouse keeper position. The multiple letters from men seeking appointments who described their inability to labor in another industry, as well as government reports citing the need to retain good keepers suggests the low standing of the occupation. The fact that ninety percent of appointed female keepers were widows, supports the effect of societal pressures on their hiring, as widows were generally viewed as deserving public assistance. It further indicates the vital role the local community played in helping widows garner appointments as neighbors petitioned the collector of customs on the women's behalf.

The employment experience of women lighthouse keepers was different than most other women during the Early Republic. While wages were lower for women in general, female lighthouse keepers earned equal pay to male keepers. The lighthouse keeper position was also a full-time job that lasted an average of ten years, whereas most wage work for women in this time period was temporary, seasonal or supplementary. As women keepers were "unseen," they were able to address concerns to supervisors as keepers and not as women workers, allowing them equal opportunity to male keepers to improve conditions at their lighthouses. This contradicts the experiences of women workers in textile mills, for example, who were very much identified as female and had less ability to address working conditions as equals to their male employers. Realizing the differences between the work situation of women lighthouse keepers and general women workers encourages better understanding of the multiple factors that affected women and their work opportunities in the Early Republic.

Why did these women want to be keepers? For many families, keeping a lighthouse was a way of life and certain families maintained the same lighthouse for generations. These jobs were not inherited per se, but familial appointments were approved for the convenience of the government. The case of the Witbecks at Stuyvesant Lighthouse on the Hudson River in New York is a good example. Volkert Witbeck was appointed in 1830 and his widow, Christina, followed him as keeper in 1841. Their daughter, Ann, in turned served from 1853 to 1866. If they were willing to do the labor the family member could secure housing and a dependable federal salary. But what about widows and family members who did not become keepers? Some women did not want to do this job, or were replaced by others. Other women either chose not to pursue appointment upon the death of the male family member, or were not afforded the opportunity due to other men chosen or politically appointed. Instances such as these make it clear the profession was patriarchal and women existed on the periphery.

That being said, a few women achieved great fame while at a lighthouse. American lighthouse heroines such as Ida Lewis, who is credited with saving upwards of twenty people from the sea, were called “America’s Grace Darling.”¹ The gallant view of these women, although not without merit, when incorporated into romantic notions of lighthouse life, has continued to muddle the historic investigation of these women.

Current research and publications by Mary and Candace Clifford, the U.S. Coast Guard, the National Park Service, the U.S. Lighthouse Society and Bethany Bromwell have been working at uncovering the legacy of female lighthouse keepers, but there is still a dearth of knowledge about keepers before the Civil War. Trying to uncover the

¹ “Ida Lewis, America’s Grace Darling, Ill; Feared Aged Keeper of Lime Rock Lighthouse is Dying After Apoplectic Seizure,” 22 October 1911, *New York Times*.

stories of the women lighthouse keepers is difficult during the Early Republic when these women were made invisible within the Lighthouse Establishment and society. The view that “their true characteristics and actions are always present below the fluff,” although an important step in telling the complete story of women keepers, in effect only identifies their service.² Focusing solely on a “they existed” interpretation, keeps women lighthouse keepers on the periphery of American history.

There also remains an emphasis on what Gerda Lerner long ago called “contribution history,” in which contributions of women to lighthouse history are emphasized instead of what these women really experienced.³ The description of women keepers as “true trailblazers” for women in federal employment relegates these early keepers to static figures in the long arc of women’s labor movement.⁴ The women keepers, however, were not single working-class women striving to open occupations with equal wages for future female federal employees. They were most often widows, focused on maintaining a steady income to support their families. The continuous retelling in secondary sources and popular lighthouse literature of celebrated stories about famous keepers, such as Ida Lewis, Kate Moore, and Abbie Burgess, also continues to overshadow the real lives of the women keepers.

The biographical sketches of Rebecca Flaherty, Harriet Towner and Charlotte Layton personalize the experiences of women who have generally been whitewashed in a romantic view of lighthouse keepers. Rebecca, Harriet and Charlotte each experienced the hardships of widowhood in the dynamic atmosphere of the Early Republic and were

² Bromwell, “Mothers of the Sea,” 85.

³ Gerda Lerner, “Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges,” *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 1/2 (Autumn 1975): 5-6.

⁴ U.S. Coast Guard, “Women Lighthouse Keepers,” United States Government, http://www.uscg.mil/History/uscghist/Women_Keepers.asp.

agents on their own behalf to petition and keep a stable position as lighthouse keeper. They worked long hours, raising their families while also tending the light and cleaning both their home and the lighthouse equipment. The position of lighthouse keeper was used both by the women and by the federal government as an informal type of welfare in a rapidly changing world. In the post-revolutionary world of the Early Republic, the roles and relations of the federal government and local community were in flux. Such conditions created opportunities for women as boundaries and limits were being questioned and refined.

Future studies of lighthouse keepers during the Early Republic would benefit from more investigation into widows. Although forty-five widows were known to keep the lights, it would be beneficial to uncover how many widows were not appointed after their husbands' death and why. Whether this number was large or small it would give a better understanding of the government's hiring policy of widows. Further, although the ages of a few women were examined, a detailed analysis of all the keepers' ages may elucidate how age and lifecycle issues may have affected the women's options and choices. The early male keepers appear to have been veterans, possibly older and frequently suffering from some condition that prevented them from seeking other employment. Was this the case for all the men? An investigation into the status, age and health of the men keepers would give insight to how the lighthouse keeper position was viewed, and also important information about the male keepers' experiences.

Another area that would benefit from more exploration is the employment of women in other federal positions, such as postmistress, or office clerk. Were the experiences of women lighthouse keepers similar to other female federal employees?

How and why were women hired for some government jobs and not others? What was the motivation for these women to seek out federal employment? Did they simply struggle to survive in a rapidly changing world or does their tenureship indicate an expansion of women's rights as citizens? Such research would broaden the general understanding of women and work in the Early Republic, and elucidate the continued affect of prescribed gender roles on working women today.⁵

After the Early Republic, the greatest number of female keepers was during the 1870s. By turn of the century, lighthouse positions became more attractive to men because of civil service benefits and advanced machinery that "professionalized" the occupation. The Great Depression also meant fewer female keepers when their jobs were given to men or to World War I veterans whose need to support a family was seen as more urgent than a woman's. Finally, in 1939 President Roosevelt merged the Lighthouse Service with the USCG to militarize the coasts in preparation for the Second World War. Male keepers could choose to remain civilian or join the U.S. Coast Guard, but women could only be civilians, which effectively heralded the termination of female keepers.⁶ The last civilian female lighthouse keeper was Fannie May Salter, Keeper of Turkey Point Light in Maryland from 1925 to 1947.

⁵ Women today continue to work disproportionately in healthcare, education, hospitality, and retail. U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Women in Management: Female Managers' Representation, Characteristics, and Pay, GAO-10-1064T," (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010), 4. They also average seventy-seven cents on each dollar earned by a male counterpart. "Fact Sheet C350: The Gender Wage Gap: 2009," Institute for Women's Policy Research, <http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/C350.pdf>. Gender is still used as a reason to exclude women from some positions, especially in the armed forces. "Women in Submarines Face Health Issues," 5 April 2010, *Washington Times*.

⁶ Bromwell, "Mothers of the Sea," 70-73.

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APPENDIX A

FEMALE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPERS, 1826-1859

Name	Last	Lighthouse	State	From	To	Status
Mrs. Edward	Shoemaker	Old Field Point	NY	1826	1827	Widow
Rebecca	Flaherty	Sand Key	FL	1830	1835	Widow
Ann	Davis	Point Lookout	MD	1830	1847	Widow
Elizabeth	Smith	Old Field Point	NY	1830	1856	Widow
Rachel	Wolcott	Marblehead	OH	1832	1834	Widow
Abbey	Waite	Warwick Neck	RI	1832	1838	Widow
Barbara	Mabrity	Key West	FL	1832	1862	Widow
Elizabeth	Riley	North Point	MD	1834	1857	Widow
Eliza A.	Daboll	Morgan Point	CT	1838	1854	Widow
Michaela	Ingraham	Pensacola	FL	1840	1855	Widow
Catharine	Whittlesey	Lynde Point	CT	1841	1852	Widow
Christina	Witbeck	Stuyvesant	NY	1841	1853	Widow
Carmalite	Philibert	Choctaw Point	AL	1842	1852	Widow
Patty	Potter	Stonington	CT	1842	1854	Widow
*Charlotte	Sutor	Piney Point	MD	1844	1846	Widow
*Fanny	Chase	Cuttyhunk Island	MA	1844	1847	Widow
Harriet	Towner	Michigan City	IN	1844	1853	Widow
Claudine	Hiern	Pass Christian	MS	1844	1861	Unmarried Sister

Name	Last	Lighthouse	State	From	To	Status
Elizabeth	Lusby	Turkey Point	MD	1844	1862	Widow
Rosannah	Tatham	Bodkin Island	MD	1845	1847	Widow
Susan	Harvey	Mahon	DE	1845	1855	Widow
Hannah	Brayley	Ned' Point	MA	1846	1849	Widow
*Elizabeth	Beattie	New Canal	LA	1847	1848	Widow
*Livenia	Twiford	Little Watts Island	VA	1848	1849	Widow
Demairs	Weeden	Beavertail	RI	1848	1857	Widow
Amy	Buddington	Stratford Point	CT	1848	1859	Widow
Angeline M.	Nickerson	Chatham	MA	1848	1862	Widow
Catharine	Shook	Pointe aux Barques	MI	1849	1851	Widow
Jane	O'Driscoll	New Canal	LA	1850	1853	Widow
Ann	Dudley	St. Marks Appalachee Bay	FL	1850	1854	Widow
Martha	Nuthall	Piney Point	MD	1850	1861	Widow
Harriet	Valliant	Sharp's Island	MD	1851	1856	Widow
Mary	Easton	Nantucket Cliff Beacons	MA	1852	1856	Widow
Martha A.	Edwards	Point Lookout	MD	1853	1855	Widow
Sarah	Levy	Fishing Battery Island	MD	1853	1855	Widow
Mary	Maher	Oyster Beds/Cockspur Is.	GA	1853	1856	Widow
Margaret	Stuart	Bombay Hook	DE	1853	1862	Daughter
Ann	Witbeck	Stuyvesant	NY	1853	1866	Daughter

Name	Last	Lighthouse	State	From	To	Status
Mrs. Thomas	Hudson	Cow Island	NY	1853	1873	"Married"
*Mrs. Chas M.	O'Malley	Bois Blanc	MI	1854	1855	"Married"
†Mary J.	Reynolds	Biloxi	MS	1854	1866	Other Widow
Mary R.	Havens	Ship Island	MS	1855	1858	Widow
Permelia	Edwards	Point Lookout	MD	1855	1869	Daughter
*Elizabeth	Diman	Bristol Ferry	RI	1856	1857	Widow
Charlotte A.	Layton	Point Pinos	CA	1856	1860	Widow
Mary A.	Foster	Old Field Point	NY	1856	1869	Widowed Sister
Sarah	Thomas	Cove Point	MD	1857	1859	Widow
†Amelia	Deweese	Old Point Comfort	VA	1857	1861	Other Widow
Nancy	Rose	Stony Point	NY	1857	1904	Widow
Catherine A.	Murdock	Rondout Creek	NY	1857	1907	Widow
Clarinda	Mott	Windmill Point	VT	1859	1862	Unknown
Sarah E.	Johnson	Humboldt Bay	CA	1859	1863	Widow
Sarah Ann	Hooper	Elm Tree	NY	1859	1867	Widow

Source: Compilation of data from author's research of these primary and secondary sources: National Archives [Registers of Lighthouse Keepers, 1845-1912 (M1373); Notices of Removal 1850-1855; Notices of Appointments 1849-1855; List of Appointments of Light-House Keepers 1832-1860; Salaries of Lighthouse Keepers]; *Official Register of the United States*, 1830-1859; Clifford and Clifford, *Women Who Kept the Lights*; U.S. Coast Guard, "Women Lighthouse Keepers."

*Not included in the lists by Clifford and Clifford or the USCG.

†Widows not related to the previous keeper.

Table B.1 Annual Salaries for all Principal Lighthouse Keepers in the United States on 30 September 1835 (Total 187)

	ME	NH	MA	RI	VT	CT	NY	NJ	PA	DE	MD	VA	NC	SC	GA	LA	FL	AL	MS	OH	MI		M	F
*\$250	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	2	0
\$300	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4	0
\$350	17	1	19	8	1	10	20	2	1	1	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	4	97	94	3
\$375	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0
\$400	2	0	10	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	5	7	2	4	0	2	0	0	1	2	40	40	0
\$410	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0
\$450	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	10	10	0
\$460	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
\$500	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	3	3	2	0	0	0	12	11	1
†\$533	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
\$550	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	0
\$600	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	4	3	0	0	0	0	13	12	1
‡\$650	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
TOTAL	24	4	33	9	1	10	24	4	2	6	12	7	7	3	5	8	10	3	1	8	6	187		
M	24	4	33	8	1	10	23	4	2	6	10	7	7	3	5	8	9	3	1	8	6		182	
F	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0			5

Female Principal Keepers (as spelled in report):

Abbey Waite (Warweck Neck, RI) \$350

Elizabeth Smith (Old Field Pt, NY) \$350

Elizabeth Riley (North Point, MD) \$600

Ann Davis (Point Lookout, MD) \$350

Barbara Mabrity (Key West, FL) \$500

*\$250 for Commanding Officers of Forts for Lights: Bayou St. John (LA), Mobile (AL)

†\$533 for Patrick Ramsbottom keeping Tybee Light (\$433) and separate beacon (\$100)

‡\$650 for Kendal Batson keeping Cape Henlopen Light (\$400) and separate beacon (\$250)

Table B.2 Annual Salaries for all Principal Lighthouse Keepers in the United States on 30 September 1845 (Total 235)

	ME	NH	MA	VT	RI	CT	NY	NJ	PA	DE	MD	VA	NC	SC	GA	OH	FL	AL	LA	MI		M	F
\$300	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4	0
\$350	22	1	19	1	8	10	27	1	2	3	8	1	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	18	129	120	9
\$375	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0
\$400	1	0	11	0	1	0	3	0	0	3	3	5	6	1	4	1	3	0	0	2	44	43	1
\$410	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0
\$425	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
\$450	2	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	2	1	0	0	0	12	12	0
\$460	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
\$500	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	4	4	4	0	16	13	3
\$533	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
\$550	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1
\$600	1	3	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	11	10	1
\$650	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0
*\$850	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
*\$860	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
*\$900	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
*\$960	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	5	5	0
*\$1440	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
TOTAL	29	4	38	1	9	10	37	1	2	9	13	8	6	4	5	11	11	4	13	20	235		
M	29	4	37	1	9	8	35	1	2	9	9	7	6	4	5	11	9	3	12	19		220	
F	0	0	1	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	1			15

Female Principal Keepers (as spelled in report), states in brackets denote where listed in Official Register:

Fanny Chase (Cuttyhunk, MA) \$350, Catharine F. Whittlesey (Lynde Point, CT) \$350, Patty Potter (Stonington, CT) \$350, Christina Witbeck (Stuyvesant, NY) \$350, Elizabeth Smith (Old Field Pt, NY) \$350, Rosannah Tatham (Bodkin Island, MD) \$400, Elizabeth Riley (North Pt., MD) \$600, Elizabeth Lusby (Turkey Pt, MD) \$350, Ann Davis (Pt. Lookout, MD) \$350, Charlotte Sutor (Piney Pt, MD [VA]) \$350, Miss C.A. Hiern (Ship Is., MS [LA]) \$500, Carmelite Philibert (Chocktaw Point, AL) \$500, Barbara Mabrity (Key West, FL) \$500, Mrs. M. Ingraham (Pensacola, FL) \$550, Harriet C. Towner (Michigan City, IN [MI]) \$350.

*These salaries denote extra pay above max allowable of \$650 due to more lights or location: \$850 (500+350): Redmond Cuevas; \$860 (500+360): Amos Butcher; \$900 (600+300): Robt. Daniels; \$960 (600+360): Jas. White, Robt. Johnson, Jonas Lory, Thos. Beattie, Sam'l Hill; \$1440: Jos. Thompson

Table B.3 Annual Salaries for all Principal Lighthouse Keepers in the United States in 1855 (Total 357)

	ME	NH	MA	RI	NY	PA	CT	VT	NJ	DE	VA	MD	NC	SC	GA	FL	AL	MS	LA	TX	OH	MI	IN	IL	WI	CA	OR	M	F
\$100	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	1
\$120	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
\$180	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0
\$300	0	0	5	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	1
\$330	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
\$350	24	1	21	11	29	1	9	0	0	4	1	9	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	26	1	1	10	0	0	151	7
\$360	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
\$375	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
\$400	3	0	14	1	7	1	1	0	3	5	6	4	9	2	7	3	1	1	0	1	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	71	4
\$410	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
\$425	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
\$450	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	3	2	0	1	1	0	0	18	2
\$460	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
\$500	3	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	1	4	1	2	0	0	5	4	1	7	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	33	3
\$533	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
\$550	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	0
\$600	2	2	1	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	2	0	0	8	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	24	1
\$850	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
\$1,000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	1	8	0
\$1,100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
Total	38	3	45	12	52	2	13	1	3	13	13	19	14	6	8	15	5	2	16	7	14	33	1	2	11	8	1		
M	38	3	43	11	49	2	12	1	3	11	13	14	14	6	7	14	5	0	15	7	14	33	1	2	11	8	1	338	
F	0	0	2	1	3	0	1	0	0	2	0	5	0	0	1	1	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		19

Female Principal Keepers (as spelled in report): Ang. M. Nickerson (Chatham, MA) \$400, Mary Easton (Nantucket Cliffs, MA) \$300, Dem. Weeden (Beavertail, RI) \$350, Mrs. Thos. Hudson (Cow Island, NY) \$100, Ann Witbeck (Stuyvesant, NY) \$100, Elizabeth Smith (Old Field Pt, NY) \$350, Amy Buddington (Stratford Pt, CT) \$350, Susan Harney (Mahon's Ditch, DE) \$450, Miss M. Stuart (Bombay Hook, DE) \$450, Mrs. Nuthall (Piney Point, MD) \$350, Paurelia Edwards (Pt. Lookout, MD) \$350, Elizabeth Riley (North Pt, MD) \$600, Elizabeth Lusby (Turkey Pt, MD) \$350, Sarah Levy (Fishing Battery, MD) \$400, Mary Maher (Cockspur Is., GA) \$400, Barbary Mabrity (Key West, FL) \$500, Mary J. Reynolds (Biloxi, MS) \$400, Mary R. Havens (Ship Is., MS) \$500, C.A. Hiern (Pass Christian, LA) \$500.

VITA

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Virginia Neal Thomas was born in Morehead City, North Carolina and in 1993 graduated from Pamlico County High School (Bayboro, NC). She received a Bachelor of Arts in Latin with a minor in History from the University of North Carolina Greensboro in May 1997. Virginia then taught Latin at a high school for a year before moving to Chicago and ultimately serving a tour in the U.S. Coast Guard as a Quartermaster. Military duties aboard USCG Cutter *Mobile Bay* included ship navigation and positioning aids to navigation, as well as physically restoring dilapidated lighthouses.

After her honorable discharge, Virginia moved around the country with her husband who remained in the U.S. Coast Guard, gaining hands-on experience in archival research and museum practices at various institutions: Door County Maritime Museum (Sturgeon Bay, WI), Cordova Historical Museum (Cordova, AK), Clallam County Historical Society (Port Angeles, WA), and The Mariners' Museum (Newport News, VA). Virginia is currently the curator of the USCG National Aids to Navigation School Museum located at the U.S. Coast Guard Training Center in Yorktown, Virginia. In August 2009, she entered the Graduate School at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and earned a Master of Arts in History in December 2010.

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